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Illustrator • Riv
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Beyond Memories

"UH..."
When Flora witnessed the smile that Rio directed at Celia, she frowned at the difference in treatment she could feel in comparison to what she'd gotten.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

Aishia said, reaching her hand out to pet Miharu's cheek softly.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Rio
A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Miharu, Aki, and Masato's safety.

Amakawa Haruto
Rio's identity in a previous life as a Japanese university student. Miharu's childhood friend and Aki's half brother.

Aishia
The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.

Ayase Miharu
Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Doesn't know that her savior Rio is the reincarnation of Haruto.

OTHER WORLDERS

Sakata Hiroaki
Young man summoned from another world as a hero.

Sendo Aki
Haruto's half sister and Masato's stepsister.

Sendo Masato
Bright and honest, Aki's stepbrother.

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE

Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl

Orphia
High Elf Girl

Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl

Arslan
Werelion Boy

Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister

Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

Celia Claire
Daughter of a count and Rio's former academy teacher. Currently in hiding as she travels with Rio.

Latifa
Werefox Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan".

KINGDOM OF GALARC

Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a Duke & President of the Ricca Guild

Roanna Fontaine
A noble daughter accompanying Princess Flora

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Prologue: Beyond Memories

Early one morning, in the spirit folk village…

In the house where Miharu was living together with Latifa and the others, Miharu was sleeping alone in her room. However, from the look on her face, she seemed to be having a bad dream.

“H-Haru-kun?!” After a moment, she let out a frantic yell and moved her hands as though to hug someone, but the person she was trying to hug wasn’t there.

…*What was I doing?* Miharu returned to her senses with a gasp and looked around the room, confirming where she was. It was a familiar room — the room she had been sleeping in every day since coming to the village.

Was I… dreaming?

Right… it was a dream. She recalled seeing a dream. A very sad dream…

…*I can’t remember it*. Miharu frowned in frustration. It was an extremely important dream, wasn’t it? Someone had been in pain… That’s why Miharu had tried so desperately to hug the person in the dream. She knew she couldn’t be separated from them, because, if she were, that person would go somewhere far away.

“I have to remember…” Spurred on by a vague compulsion, Miharu desperately tried to remember the dream she had just moments ago. It wasn’t too late to recall something yet. There should still be something there, somewhere…

“…Haruto?” At the back of Miharu’s mind, the faint image of Rio holding a sword from behind resurfaced. Rio was watching something with an extremely stern expression in

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the dream. He glared at someone, before swinging his sword down on them… perhaps.

But upon further consideration, hadn't Miharu said the name of a different person when she woke up? The nickname of the boy she was always with when she was young…

"Haru… kun?" Miharu whispered softly. The nickname of her childhood friend, Amakawa Haruto…

Was that a dream… about Haru-kun? Miharu frowned sadly at the doubt she felt. Then, she suddenly recalled her past with Haruto and clenched her fist around her nightgown.

Back in those days, Miharu had thought it was only natural to be with Haruto. It was a given that she would grow older with Haruto, and those days they spent together would continue forever naturally. She had been seven years old when she learned that it wasn't meant to be — nine years ago. It was why Miharu could remember those days she spent with Haruto so clearly, it was as though they had only happened yesterday. Because Miharu liked Haruto — because Miharu *loved* Haruto, she was devastated to be separated from such an important person. It was so painful that she would never forget it.

She still remembered the promise they made when they parted, too. There was no binding power at all behind it — a fleeting promise between two children. Her feelings now could be different from love, but even so, that promise was still something sacred to her.

That's why Miharu would occasionally remember Haruto, even though she had grown older. While she felt very sad that Aki had nothing but prejudice towards Haruto, every time Miharu remembered him, she felt warmth in her chest that supported her, as though he was beside her.

She wondered how Haruto had grown up. Did he still remember the promise like she did? If he did, and they were

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ever to reunite like they promised, what would they do? Miharu thought about those things every time she remembered Haruto.

The answer was the same every time: it was possible she would fall in love with Haruto once more. It'd be a wonderful thing if that happened, she thought. But recently, whenever Miharu remembered Haruto, she found her chest tightening in pain instead. And she knew the reason why: it had started after she began living in this world with Haruto.

Haruto and Haruto. Their identical names could be part of it, but Miharu occasionally found herself feeling a sense of déjà vu as she went about her days living with him. She had started overlapping the two — Haruto, and Amakawa Haruto.

Miharu wasn't very good at interacting with the opposite gender to begin with. She was fine with the younger Masato since he was still a child, but she sometimes found herself in an awkward silence around Aki's older stepbrother, Takahisa. That was why the only same-aged boy Miharu could spend time with without any objection was Haruto, who she had grown up with from a young age.

Until she came to this world and met Haruto, that is…

For some reason, from the moment she had met the Haruto in this world, she had never felt nervous around him. It made Haruto one of the few people Miharu could interact with without feeling particularly uncomfortable. If she didn't count Haruto from her childhood, then he might've been the first.

The reason she felt so comfortable around him was because the feeling that Haruto and Amakawa Haruto gave off was similar. She wasn't able to explain it in detail, but the feeling of reassurance when they were together was the same. Miharu started to realize that as she spent more time with Haruto, and before she knew it, she was overlapping Haruto with Amakawa Haruto.

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However, she didn't think that was necessarily a good thing, as it was rude to compare someone with someone else like that. It was a feeling Miharu had hidden in her heart... until she heard the story of when Rio first visited the village from Orphia and Alma.

According to Orphia and Alma, Rio had muttered "Mii-chan" when he'd been unconscious in a cell. It was the nickname that Haruto had once called Miharu by. Of course, it could've been a coincidence, and there may have been nothing behind his sleep talking; not to mention the fact that Haruto had previously said he died a university student. Even so, Miharu couldn't help the seed of suspicion growing within her. It was possible Haruto's previous life was as Amakawa Haruto.

That couldn't be, Miharu said to herself, but the suspicion remained.

I can only remember it vaguely, but the person in my dream looked like Haruto... Miharu's instincts were telling her the dream was about Haruto. As though insisting that the two men were the same.

"Then..." Miharu whispered quietly. "Does that mean Haruto is Haru-kun...?"

Her anxious voice echoed softly in the quiet room.

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Chapter 1: Atonement

Outside of Amande's city walls, in the location where Rio and Lucius had been battling it out mere moments ago, Rio and Flora now stood closely facing each other.

"U-Umm, Sir Rio…" Flora clutched Rio's sleeve and whispered his name quietly.

"Yes." Without breaking eye contact, Rio nodded with a guilty look, but his heart wasn't present. After a moment, he slowly looked up at the sun rising in the distant sky. Unreachable and bright, it was like something to be yearned for…

Flora gently tugged the sleeve of Rio's shirt, asking once again, "Sir Rio… You're Sir Rio, aren't you?"

"…" Rio looked back down at Flora as though he had been dragged back to reality. But he didn't speak, instead frowning in thought at how to deal with the current situation.

Haruto, is everything okay? At the same time, Aishia's telepathy echoed in Rio's head.

…Yeah, it's fine. Rio calmed himself, and replied to Aishia. *I'm just a little busy right now. Can you contact me later?*

Got it. He heard Aishia's immediate response before the telepathy cut off. Once it did, Rio finally opened his mouth to speak.

"…Who might you be referring to?" He stared at Flora's face and feigned ignorance.

An extremely saddened look crossed Flora's face before she was enraged by the answer that didn't meet her expectations. "Y-You, you're S-S-Sir Rio! Just now, that man said so — that you're Rio!" she said in frustration.

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“...I was once called that, yes. I have the name of Rio in addition to my name of Haruto. But why are you calling me by such a name, Princess Flora?” Rio cocked his head and asked with an utmost look of curiosity, as though implying the Rio that Flora knew was someone else.

“...Mm...” Flora felt like she had been strongly rejected, and her face twisted with tears.

“I currently live by the public name of Haruto. Pardon my rudeness in asking so, but I would be extremely grateful if you could forget what you heard earlier.” Rio cut to the chase with his request without any further explanation.

“N-No, I don’t want to!” Flora clung to Rio’s chest like a lost child.

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While Rio's eyes widened, he still managed to speak in a calm tone. "...May I ask the reason why?"

"T-That's... because..." Flora's voice trembled slightly as she looked up at Rio's face right before her.

There's no mistaking the fact she remembers me. What do I do? Rio calmly tried to think of a way to deal with the situation as he looked down at Flora.

When it came to Flora hearing his conversation with Lucius, he had no regrets. He considered the conversation a necessary ritual to precede their battle, after all.

However, Flora's memory of him was clearer than he thought it'd be, and her strong feelings about it were a little beyond his expectations. He had no idea what she was thinking. After all, he'd had no interactions with her at the academy, and their social statuses were far from each other.

If she's this desperate about it, it may be impossible to fully deny everything, Rio sensed, which left him with limited options. He could admit to the truth honestly, come up with some kind of convincing excuse, or purposefully confuse her to change the subject...

At any rate, the decision came down to the fact that Rio didn't trust Flora. While he believed she wasn't a bad person, he would be in a bind if his admission caused her to act rashly in response. That was why he had to make the truth as vague as possible.

Which meant the safest option would be...

"I... I always wanted to apologize! I always wanted to say thank you!" Flora proclaimed with every fiber of her being.

She had always felt regret for her own failure in being unable to do anything during Rio's former academy days, when he was being discriminated against right before her very eyes. That was why she couldn't simply forget the existence of the person who had saved her. She had made a vow that she wouldn't forget. The sudden encounter had left her head blank as a sheet, but whether it was coincidence or

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fate, she couldn't let this once in a lifetime chance of reuniting with Rio slip past her fingers.

"Whatever for?" Rio merely tried to divert the truth with a troubled look.

"For what happened at the academy!" Flora said, getting to the core of the matter.

After a long moment of hesitation, Rio responded. "...I cannot think of any reason why I should be receiving such words of gratitude and apology from you. If you are referring to this incident, then please do not let it bother you. There was simply some business to attend to between me and that man."

Even Flora could read what he was implying with that, body shaking as she asked, "...Am I being a bother?"

Rio took the clinging Flora by the shoulders and moved her back a distance so that he could speak to her while bowing his head. "Of course not. But right now, I am Haruto. If your Highness insists on feeling gratitude and apology for this incident, I would request that you kindly forget the name Rio. That would be more than enough."

"Ah, uh..." That seemed to shock Flora, as her expression was lost for a moment. She tried to say something, but her mouth didn't move.

There was a person resembling Rio before her, and the final words coming from him resonated strangely within her head. As her head rapidly cooled down, an indescribable feeling swirled violently in her chest.

Perhaps this was a punishment for her own foolishness. After how much misery he had been put through by her and the others around her, it was simply too convenient to be given a chance to apologize like this. Once she came to that conclusion, Flora suddenly felt extremely ashamed.

I... really am a fool... Flora thought bitterly. She felt so sorry and helpless with impatience, as she had been desperately searching for something she could do. Soon, she

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realized there was only one thing she *could* do.

“Of… course. I-I’m sorry. I was… mistaken, and asked something strange… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Flora cried big drops of tears as she bowed her head with a heavily trembling voice.

“No, there’s no need to cry in apology…” Rio felt rather helpless, but this was for the best. There was no other choice right now, he told himself.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry…” Flora continued to apologize with her head down. She rubbed her eyes, desperately holding back the tears, then bit down hard on her lip and stifled her emotions.

After a moment, Flora slowly raised her head. There were no longer any tears flowing, but it was clear that she had been crying. She had an awful look on her face.

“I’ll escort you back to the city.” Rio averted his eyes awkwardly.

“…Yes, please.” Flora nodded weakly.

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Chapter 2: Return

Meanwhile, a few moments earlier... The eastern skies welcomed daybreak as light reached the western skies and the ground below.

"Ah...!" The people present in Liselotte's garden were all looking up at the sky in a daze. There, soaring through the skies was the black dragon-like creature Liselotte's party had witnessed just the other day. Its mouth was open as it breathed a jet-black flame down at the city walls towards Amande's northwest area.

However, the breath did not reach the ground. It collided with a single beam of light that stretched up from the ground and competed for dominance. In the next moment, the jet-black breath was pushed back, and a blinding flash of light tore across the sky.

Pretty... Liselotte vaguely thought about how beautiful the scene was. It was probably a magic of the highest grade, packed with tremendous destructive power, yet she couldn't help but feel captivated by its beauty. Next to Liselotte, Celia was also looking at the sky in awe.

"...It's retreating," she mumbled quietly. The black dragon-like creature swiftly evaded the light that pushed back its breath, proceeding to change directions and fly away. Those in the estate garden watched on, astonished. After some time had passed, Aishia approached Celia with light footsteps.

"I'm done here, too. You can cancel your magic now," she said in a casual tone, as though she had returned from a stroll. The revenants that had overrun the estate garden mere moments ago were all eliminated, leaving no trace

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behind. It really was nothing more than a walk in the park for Aishia.

“O-Okay. You’ve worked hard.” Celia deactivated the *Magicae Murum* barrier she had maintained until now and looked at Aishia as though she wanted to ask something.

“Haruto is fine,” Aishia informed her shortly, having guessed her thoughts. At that, Celia’s expression loosened slightly. Hearing Rio was safe from Aishia’s own mouth lightened the burden on her chest a little. She couldn’t ask for details in front of Liselotte, but she would believe in Aishia’s words.

“O-Oh,” Celia stammered in a light tone.

“…Thank you so much, to the both of you. Your assistance has helped minimize the damage that could’ve taken place here. I am truly grateful from the bottom of my heart.” Liselotte bowed her head to Aishia and Celia.

“N-No, I didn’t do anything useful. It was all thanks to Aishia.” Celia shook her head in a fluster, looking at Aishia.

“I only fought for Haruto’s sake. The situation still isn’t resolved, so we should consider what happens next,” Aishia said, looking around the estate. Thanks to Aishia’s participation and the fact the revenants were toying with the knights while fighting, the damage wasn’t as great as it could have been, but there were still casualties. Some of the knights among them were unconscious, so it was too early to think optimistically. There was also the possibility of fights breaking out elsewhere, outside of the estate grounds, too.

“…Of course.” Liselotte focused her expression into a serious one.

“Please pay us no heed and return to your post, Lady Liselotte. If you need an extra healer, I am able to use *Cura* and can lend a hand,” Celia said, urging Liselotte to take action.

“I’m sorry for putting you in this position. Could you please accompany me, then? I must confirm the situation

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with haste,” Liselotte requested with a bow of her head.

Cura users were few and far between. The effectiveness of recovery varied between users, but Celia’s use of magic in the earlier battle was of a rather high skill. There was much to be expected.

“Yes,” Celia agreed immediately. There was a high probability she knew the people inside, and though she was currently in hiding from the world, there was no way she could turn a blind eye with lives at stake.

“Follow me, then.”

Thus, Celia and Aishia accompanied Liselotte inside the mansion.

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Meanwhile, in the living room inside the mansion, Roanna was healing Duke Huguenot. She used her healing magic to treat his abdomen, which had been punched by the Alphonse revenant.

“Guh… What’s happening… outside…?” Duke Huguenot asked, his face distorted from the pain in his torso. His mouth was stained red with blood he had spat out.

“Please refrain from speaking. Your internal organs are difficult enough to heal already,” Roanna scolded the stretched out Duke Huguenot with a serious expression. Squatted right beside her was Stewart, who was watching the treatment go on with a terribly panicked face.

“Lady Roanna, Father… Father will be all right, won’t he?!” Stewart asked in disarray.

“Calm down. The healing will take time, but there should be no fear for his life,” Roanna answered bluntly.

“…Okay,” Stewart fidgeted restlessly and nodded.

I don’t know why he passed out, but Sir Hiroaki is safe. But I worry for what happened to Princess Flora, who escaped outside… Even as Roanna devoted herself to healing

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Duke Huguenot, she worried for the safety and whereabouts of Flora. While there was no mistaking the fact that remaining in the room at that point was dangerous, she knew revenants had appeared outside soon after. She couldn't help but worry.

"Has the knight who went out with the message still not returned?" Roanna asked in frustration and looked outside the door.

"He has just returned with Lady Liselotte, my lady!" the knight on guard outside the door replied. A short while later, Liselotte appeared alongside the messenger knight. Beside her were two attendants, as well as Celia and Aishia.

"Ugh…" The newcomers looked at the disaster around the room with solemn faces. There was a great hole opened in the wall of the hallway, and the interior was a battletorn mess. Laid to rest in the corner of the room were the corpses of the two knights that had been guarding the door before the attack.

Celia had a solemn face too, but when she noticed Duke Huguenot and her former students Roanna and Stewart, she readjusted her hood lower in a casual manner.

"…You two heal the wounded knights," Liselotte ordered her two accompanying attendants, thinking it best to begin treatment on the knights that appeared to be less wounded.

"Yes, my lady!" The two attendants nodded, promptly taking action.

"May I ask what happened here?" Liselotte approached the wounded Duke Huguenot lying down and looked at the idle people for confirmation.

"M-Monsters came in! Humanoid ones! What was the mansion security doing?! My father was injured because of this!" Stewart cried out, scolding Liselotte in agitation.

"I apologize for my delay in noticing the monster's attack…" Liselotte apologized with a shamed expression.

"S-Stop that, Stewart," Duke Huguenot said with a

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grimace. “Roanna, you explain in his place.”

A bitter expression rose on Stewart’s face.

“Then I shall heal in her place.” Celia immediately walked over to Roanna and swapped out her healing duty.

“And you are…?” Roanna looked at Celia with her face hidden under the hood and tilted her head curiously.

“A helper. Report to Lady Liselotte first,” Celia said before placing her hand over Duke Huguenot’s wound and chanting the spell “*Cura*.”

“A swarm of humanoid monsters came surging into this room. We somehow managed to make it through thanks to Sir Hiroaki’s efforts, but Duke Huguenot was wounded severely…” Roanna reported on the situation with a small breath.

“…Is the hero safe?” Liselotte looked at Hiroaki and asked nervously. Hiroaki had been laid on the floor, still unconscious.

“Yes, after he drove away the monsters he suddenly passed out, but there’s no particular danger to his life. Also, if I may ask — where is Princess Flora? We managed to get her away from the room, but…” Roanna asked in a panic.

“I’d like you to listen to this calmly…” Liselotte began, looking at Roanna.

“…Please, tell me.” Roanna had a bad feeling, but urged her to continue.

Liselotte gritted her teeth and stated the truth bluntly. “Princess Flora has been kidnapped by someone.”

“W-What did you say?! Why… How? How could that happen?!” Sure enough, Roanna was extremely upset.

“The details are unclear. When the monsters were rushing into the garden, a strange man came running out of the mansion with Princess Flora and escaped outside of the grounds in the chaos.”

“N-No…” Roanna looked like the end of the world had come as she sank to her knees weakly. “…Sir Haruto is

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currently pursuing the man alone, but we cannot afford to sit idly in the meantime, either. First, there is still the possibility that the man's accomplices are in the area, so could you tell me the events that took place when Princess Flora was taken out of the room?" *There may be a clue there*, Liselotte thought as she asked, but Roanna was white as a sheet from the shock.

"I heard a gentleman's voice in the confusion when the humanoid monsters were swarming into the room, s-so I told her to… I can't believe that man was… W-What h-have I done…" Roanna said in a trembling voice. In all probability, that man must have been the culprit that took Flora, which left Roanna feeling like she had the responsibility for entrusting Flora to him.

"…There's no point in worrying about what has been done. The only thing we can do now is believe in Sir Haruto. Your judgment was the correct one in that situation, Roanna. Liselotte, you too. The situation here is being handled. You should return to giving directions to everyone else," Duke Huguenot said with an ashen face.

"A-Are you really all right, Duke Huguenot? Please don't push yourself…" Liselotte asked in a fluster.

"No, I can tell the pain has lessened from before. It's all thanks to your wonderful skill," Duke Huguenot said, looking up at Celia as she used her healing magic.

Celia looked at Roanna from under her hood. "…No, my lady over there had already completed all the preliminary treatment with her *Cura*. All I did was continue that. Once the finishing touches have been applied, you should be good," she said humbly. She was a little scared that her former students, Roanna and Stewart, would recognize her from her voice, but the two of them seemed to be preoccupied with other things at the moment.

"F-Father! You have recovered!" Stewart brightened with a smile when he saw Duke Huguenot's complexion return to

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normal.

"…" Duke Huguenot averted his eyes from Stewart awkwardly. The difference in enthusiasm between the two showed their warped father-child relationship.

"Then I shall excuse myself for now. Sir Haruto may return at some point, so Lady Cecilia and Lady Aishia should come with me. Grace, you continue with Duke Huguenot's treatment. I'm leaving this place to the rest of you," Liselotte said.

"Understood. Please leave this to me, Lady Cecilia," Grace requested respectfully, approaching Celia to heal Duke Huguenot.

"Thank you." Celia removed her hand from the wound and passed the task on to Grace.

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Meanwhile, Rio was carrying Flora in his arms as he ran along the rooftops of the noble district at the northwest of the city. His destination was, of course, Liselotte's estate.

"…" Flora stared intensely up at Rio's face from close range. However, Rio didn't say anything despite noticing Flora's gaze.

Sir… Haruto… So close, yet so far. It made Flora feel so sad. She grasped at Rio's clothes tightly.

At that, Rio landed on the ramparts surrounding the noble district in the inner city and paused for a moment.

"The mansion is in view now."

"Yes," Flora whispered with a near inaudible voice.

"…Are you feeling unwell, by any chance? I held back as much as I could, but all that leaping must have shaken you up and down a lot. If you're feeling a bit of motion sickness, you can rest here for a moment." While Rio had a guess as to why Flora was being gloomy, he chose to offer another excuse out of consideration.

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“N-No, I’m fine.” Flora shook her head quickly; she wasn’t feeling bad because of the motion. Rio’s consideration had been seemingly off, but he had purposefully acted considerately in the wrong way. The murky feelings within Flora grew larger when she suspected that.

“Then, let’s hurry. I’m sure everyone is worried too,” Rio said calmly before leaping once more. This time, Rio’s body floated lightly in the air, as though his feet had sprouted wings. He landed like that on the roof of a nearby building.

Hop, float, hop, float. Flora felt like she was a flower petal dancing in the wind. Her body felt light, but her heart felt as though it was heavy and being swallowed by the ground below.

The short but endless silence resumed between them, and the two of them arrived at the mansion roughly a minute later.

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Rio leaped over the estate walls he had crossed once in his pursuit of Lucius and returned to Liselotte’s estate grounds. With Flora still in his arms in a princess carry, he headed towards the garden of the estate at a walking pace.

“Haruto!” Celia noticed Rio’s presence first and came running over in a hurry. Aishia was right beside her, so they probably knew he was approaching in advance.

Rio smiled gently in response to Celia and Aishia. “Sorry for worrying the two of you.”

“It’s okay. Princess Flora, I’m glad you’re safe,” Celia said awkwardly, looking at Flora. She noticed that Flora’s complexion was off, but she couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable at the novel sight of Rio holding Flora in a princess carry. It was something she never would have imagined during their academy days.

“Yes. You’re…” Flora looked at the hood-covered Celia and

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tilted her head in question. Just then, Liselotte noticed Rio's return and came running.

"Sir Haruto! Princess Flora! The two of you are safe!" Liselotte called out excitedly. Her expression was one of utmost relief, as though all of her worries had been eased.

"I have brought Princess Flora back as promised. Unfortunately, the kidnapper managed to get away..." Rio said with a bitter expression once Liselotte ran over.

"Not to worry! I can't thank you enough for bringing Princess Flora back," Liselotte vehemently denied his words. The situation had been on the brink of utter despair, but they somehow managed to avoid the worst possible outcome with this. Just having Flora return unharmed was the most fortuitous stroke of luck she could have asked for.

"Then, may I leave Princess Flora to you?" Having completed his duty, Rio wanted to entrust Flora's safety to Liselotte.

"Of course. For now, let us move inside the mansion. You can tell me the details on the way," said Liselotte.

"Understood. Then, Princess Flora, I'll let you down here," Rio said, moving to set Flora to the ground. However, Flora suddenly grabbed at Rio's clothes in clear refusal to get down on the ground. Celia and Liselotte both looked wide-eyed at Flora with surprised expressions.

"U-Umm, my legs still feel numb... I'm sorry." Flora realized she had done something awkward and made an uncomfortable face, explaining herself with a barely audible voice.

"...I understand. Then if it isn't too presumptuous of me, I shall escort you to the mansion like this," Rio stated without batting an eye.

"Thank you for your assistance, Sir Haruto." Liselotte bowed her head apologetically to Rio. She had the mistaken idea that Flora was still frightened from being kidnapped.

Celia had the same thought as Liselotte and spoke to Rio

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softly, “Umm, thank you, Haruto.”

“Yes, of course.” Rio turned a gentle smile to Celia and walked forward immediately.

“Uh…” When Flora witnessed the smile Rio directed at Celia, she frowned at the difference in treatment she could feel compared to herself, but Celia and Liselotte began walking along with them to the mansion none the wiser. For the record, most of Liselotte’s attendant girls were occupied by the cleanup efforts after all the commotion inside and outside the mansion, inevitably leaving Liselotte the role of guiding them to the mansion.

Liselotte explained the situation to an attendant nearby before inviting Rio and the others to follow her. “Now, Sir Haruto. There’s just one thing to address before I ask you about the kidnapper. Earlier, a black dragon-like creature near the northwest area released a breath. The one who forced that breath back was…”

“…It was me. I don’t know whether it was coincidental or not, but just as the kidnapper was pushed back into a corner, that breath came down. I used my enchanted sword to counter it immediately, but the culprit got away…” Rio’s face stiffened and he spoke in a flat tone.

“So it was you…” Liselotte must have expected that, as she didn’t seem all that surprised at his reply. That being said, there were many thoughts she had about it…

“I have an idea of the kidnapper’s background. Rather, I knew of the man in question… The moment he appeared in the garden, I realized I had heard that voice before. That’s why I tried to chase after him. Of course, with the intention to rescue Princess Flora as well.” Rio didn’t go too deep into the irregular and unpredictable actions of the dragon-like creature, but spoke of Lucius instead.

“Is that… true?” Celia asked Rio in a daze.

“…Yes,” Rio confirmed, ashamed.

“Do you know the man’s name?” Liselotte asked

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nervously.

“Yes. The man’s name is Lucius. I believe him to be the same person as the leader of the mercenary squad, The Heavenly Lions — also known as The Griffins,” Rio revealed in a sharp tone.

By gathering information in the Strahl region whenever possible, Rio had learned that Lucius was the name of the man that led The Griffins. He also found that descriptions of that man’s appearance aligned with what Rio knew of Lucius as well.

“I’ve heard of that. It’s the veteran mercenary squad comprised of a small number of elite warriors, right? They haven’t shown themselves in public recently, so there were rumors they had disbanded…” Liselotte nodded in contemplation.

“You’re as knowledgeable as I expected,” Rio said, turning to her.

“That’s how renowned The Griffins are in this line of business, so it was more like necessary knowledge for me… But how did you know that man, Sir Haruto?” Liselotte asked while examining Rio’s expression.

“…He’s someone I have a bit of a past with,” Rio answered evasively, an awkward look on his face.

…*Someone Rio has a past with?* Celia cocked her head and looked at Rio curiously. As far as pasts went, Rio had attended the royal academy from age seven to twelve. He shouldn’t have had many opportunities to interact with the outside world, either. This meant that this man named Lucius must have had something to do with Rio either before he turned seven, or after he left the academy.

However, contrary to Celia’s pondering, Flora — who had been listening to the words exchanged in the earlier battle — had a very sad face.

Liselotte read the situation and apologized in shame. “Forgive me, I have pried too far in my questioning.”

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Rio dismissed this and changed the topic to the core of the matter. “Not at all. But the more important question here should be which force is trying to kidnap Princess Flora, would you agree? Both the appearance of the monsters and dragon-like creature was timed too conveniently for the series of events that occurred.”

“...I’ve never heard of a technique that could control monsters, so I do admit I am curious. By force, do you think that someone has hired this mercenary named Lucius?”

“Yes. During his escape, another man assisted Lucius. His name was Reiss.”

“Reiss...”

“Does it ring a bell?” Rio asked.

“...No,” Liselotte shook her head.

“While he managed to get away, Lucius suffered heavy wounds. At the very least, he won’t be able to appear again anytime soon. If you’re going to search, then you should look around the northwest wall.”

“Understood. Thank you for the information. Oh, we’ve been chatting for a while now. Here, come this way. We’re almost there.” Liselotte directed them to a T-intersection down the corridor they were walking.

There wasn’t a sign of a single monster left inside the mansion, but just in case, small numbers of attendant girls were patrolling every area with knights in tow, strengthening the security in the area. And so, they passed many people on their way.

Liselotte stopped at the corner before they turned to the destination room and spoke to Flora in Rio’s arms. “Most regrettably, two knights have passed away. However, the hero, Lady Roanna, and Duke Huguenot are all safe. Please show them that you are as well.”

“Two... knights... I-I understand.” Two people had died because of her — Flora frowned in shame at that truth, but her dignity as a princess made her nod while biting her lip

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(incidentally, Flora was yet to be informed by Duke Huguenot that Alphonse and the knights dispatched to the forest had gone missing). Then, somewhat unconsciously, she tightened her clinging grip around Rio.

"…" A slightly uncomfortable expression showed on Rio's face. Celia glanced at his side profile.

"Then please, come this way." Liselotte began to move once more. She turned the corner and walked out into the corridor with the room where Roanna and the others were waiting.

The two knights guarding the outside of the open door immediately noticed Liselotte's appearance. When they spotted Rio carrying Flora, they yelled into the living room in a hurry. "P-Princess Flora has returned!"

"I-Is that true?! Princess Flora? Princess Flora?!" Roanna came rushing out of the door in a panic. The normally-calm girl was terribly shaken at the moment, leaping through the door and looking around the corridor wildly. Then, when she spotted Flora being carried in Rio's arms, she approached Flora on shaky legs.

"Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness you're safe…!"

"Roanna…" Flora called Roanna's name weakly.

"Are you… are you hurt anywhere, Princess Flora?! Please accept my utmost apologies. My thoughtless action led to Your Highness being placed in such terrible danger. Oh, however will I repent for this…" Roanna kneeled as soon as she reached Flora, lamenting with deep regret.

Flora shook her head with a fleeting smile. "It's not your fault, Roanna. Sir Haruto saved me, so I'm fine. Are you all right yourself? You kept protecting me…"

"Of course! I am unscathed. Duke Huguenot suffered a deep wound, but his life is no longer in danger after healing. The hero is safe too."

Flora smiled weakly. "I'm glad. But I heard there were knights that had passed away too…" she said, frowning

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regretfully.

“…Yes. The two who were originally guarding the outside of the door were killed… Umm, I understand how you must be feeling to a painful degree, but they died for the just cause of protecting Your Highness. If possible, please praise them as brave heroes.” Roanna chose her words carefully, as though to encourage Flora.

“…Right,” Flora bit her lip and nodded.

“But I’m truly, truly glad to see you’re safe, Princess Flora. If something unforgivable had been done to you, I… I… Oh, Sir Haruto, thank you. Thank you so much. I simply cannot thank you enough.” Roanna shuddered at the thought of what could have gone wrong and thanked Rio imploringly.

Rio shook his head gently. “No, it’s nothing to be thanked for. I’ll carry her inside the room, but please look after Princess Flora after that. She still seems to be frightened.”

“Of course. I will repay this debt in the future. Please, come this way,” Roanna nodded with determination before inviting them inside. Rio and the others proceeded to follow Roanna into the living room. Hiroaki was still lying unconscious, but the bodies of the two knights had been moved away somewhere.

When Rio entered the room, Duke Huguenot welcomed him and Flora with a powerful voice. “Ooh, Princess Flora! You’re safe…! Haruto, you have my gratitude!”

“Uh…” In contrast, Stewart averted his eyes from Rio awkwardly.

“It was nothing,” Rio said.

In the meantime, Roanna immediately prepared a chair for Flora to sit in. “Please, have a seat here.”

“I’m letting you down now. Excuse me.” This time, Rio made sure to put Flora down.

“…Okay. Thank you… very much,” Flora said with a somewhat reluctant face, then released her grip on Rio’s clothes. Even after being placed to sit in a chair, her gaze

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was locked on Rio's face.

Rio felt awkward on the receiving end of Flora's gaze. He looked at Celia and Aishia. "...I'm going to take my leave now. Shall we go?" he suggested now that their business was done.

"P-Please wait a moment. Where are you going?" Liselotte asked, stopping Rio in a hurry. She had received a report earlier that things had calmed down outside, so she was hoping to exchange a little more information with him.

"I'll only be a bother if I remain here like this, so I was thinking of going outside to help," Rio said while looking at Stewart.

He had just been in a dispute with him the other day. It was more than enough reason for the two of them to feel awkward about being in the same room as each other. That being said, his actual intention was to avoid Celia being in the same room as Beltrum's royalty and nobility as much as possible.

Liselotte recalled the discord between them and immediately directed the conversation to their departure. "Oh, I do apologize. May I request that of you, then?" Normally she would have noticed much sooner and moved to separate them, but the emergency situation had prevented her from getting that far, much to her regret.

Gosh, I'm hopeless. I must be tired. She'd inform Duke Huguenot and the others of what had happened after the crisis passed instead. It wasn't something she needed to prioritize at this moment.

"Leave it to me." Rio placed his right hand against his chest respectfully.

"You should go too, Liselotte. We'll get the details from Princess Flora," Duke Huguenot urged.

"Thank you for the consideration. There'll be a need to go over what is going on sooner or later, so I'll arrange a meeting once the danger has passed. I've increased the

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security inside the mansion to the maximum, so please rest your body. I will also apologize for my failures on another occasion," Liselotte spoke fluently, bowing her head.

Duke Huguenot smiled faintly. "There's no need for you to worry. Pay us no mind and continue your direction over the situation. Haruto, allow me to thank you for saving Princess Flora on a later occasion."

"Your words are enough for me," Rio lowered his head respectfully.

"Umm, Sir Haruto!" Flora suddenly called out to Rio with all her might.

"...Yes?" Rio replied, turning his fixing gaze on Flora.

"Ah, umm... Thank you very much, for what happened. Could we please talk some more later?" Flora asked with a somewhat frightened expression.

"Of course. Now, if you would excuse me. Lady Liselotte," Rio nodded respectfully with his right hand on his chest before looking at Liselotte.

"All right. I'm leaving the rest to you, Grace. You can give orders to the attendants and knights patrolling the area if you need anything," Liselotte bowed her head deeply, then called out to the attendant girl waiting in the room.

"Yes, my lady!" Grace nodded humbly.

"Then, the three of you, come this way." Liselotte led Rio and the others out of the living room.

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"Lady Liselotte, I'd like to return to the northwest area of the city to try and search for traces of the kidnappers. Would this be okay?" Rio asked once they'd left the living room with Flora and the others.

"Of course. There's nothing more I could ask for if you'd investigate," Liselotte agreed while examining Rio's expression. With her hands full with dealing with the

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monsters and no personnel free to send, the offer was something Liselotte would have gladly bowed her head to request herself, so for Haruto to volunteer was perfect. It wasn't a job to leave to an amateur, but she had no complaints if it was him.

"The kidnapper is someone of interest to me as well. I'll go and check if there are any clues," Rio declared firmly.

"Understood. I'm counting on you," Liselotte nodded.

"Leave it to me. I'd like to ask the two of you to stay here and assist Lady Liselotte. The three of us will talk when I return," Rio said to Celia and Aishia.

Celia suppressed her worries and smiled innocently. "...Okay. I'll be waiting."

"Thanks," Rio nodded with a smile to reassure Celia.

"See you later. Leave Cecilia to me," Aishia said, sending Rio off as she usually did.

"I'm counting on you, Aishia." Rio smiled.

If anything happens, let me know through telepathy, he added through said method of communication.

Yup. We won't be able to connect if you go too far, so be careful.

Rio and Aishia's telepathy range was roughly a radius of one kilometer. While it was technically possible to communicate over one kilometer, the connection quality rapidly decreased after that point. The distance from Liselotte's mansion to the area where Rio and Lucius fought was actually the limit for a clear telepathic connection.

Got it. If anything happens, prioritize the professor's safety over anything else.

Yup, nodded Aishia.

"...I'll be going then, Lady Liselotte. I intend on having a look around the west gate on my way back, so I'll report to you later," Rio said, having passed those instructions on to Aishia.

"Thank you very much. Please allow me to thank you

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officially on a later date.” Liselotte bowed her head deeply.

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Several minutes later, Rio left the mansion once again, heading for the outside of the walls to Amande’s northwest. The area where he had fought Lucius earlier was battered with violent scars from their fight. The remnants of their battle weren’t only visible by the naked eye, however.

There’s still a large amount of ode jumbled together. I won’t be able to investigate with spirit arts. When Rio felt the accumulated remnants of magical essence nearby, he sighed quietly. There was a spirit art that could detect other people’s essence by releasing one’s own essence into the area, but with this much of it around, there was no way it could detect anything effectively. And there were ways of completely suppressing essence anyway.

Which means I’ll have to look around myself. But before that… Rio immediately changed his thought process and headed to the place he had last seen Reiss holding Lucius.

The ground’s been completely gouged away. I guess he removed any traces of blood before leaving. But if he had to move while carrying Lucius, then there should be blood sprayed somewhere…

Rio touched his hand to the ground and checked for any stains of blood. Since Lucius had been bleeding profusely from his entire body, there had to be something left behind along the route they took. As long as he could find that, then he could follow those tracks.

Rio looked around for a while, but —

…There’s nothing.

There were no stains that resembled Lucius’ blood anywhere. At the very least, not within a 10 meter radius of the scene…

During their fight, Rio’s attention was directed to the

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attack from the sky for a single, mere instant, and the interception of dark and light had obstructed his vision. There weren't many ways of disappearing so abruptly in that limited time period.

I don't see any footsteps in the area either. Did they leave via the skies? Rio suddenly looked up. When Rio's spirit arts collided with the breath in the sky, the surrounding skies had been shaken by violent shockwaves, but it wasn't impossible for an experienced spirit arts user to fly through it.

...Was that man a spirit arts user too?

The possibility was there; the ball of light Reiss had conjured before leaving was created without a verbal spell. It hadn't been created with magic, at least. However, if he had flown through the sky, that should have made the trail of bloodstains even more noticeable, yet there wasn't a single trace of that.

Which means the remaining possibility is *Transilio*...

It was possible there was another method Rio hadn't considered yet, but teleportation would explain everything else. *Transilio* was impossible to recreate with the modern sorcery of Strahl, but it was a different case when ancient artifacts were involved. However, ancient artifacts with some form of teleportation in them were hard to come by, and there weren't many in circulation. It was hard to know if they existed at all.

At any rate, with no concrete evidence, Rio would have to withhold his judgment for the time being. Even if he could narrow things down, the mystery remained exactly that.

But they may have escaped through another method. I'll look around the area some more.

Regardless of whether or not they used teleportation, the wound was fatal and required immediate treatment. If they were hidden nearby, then they shouldn't have gone very far yet.

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Thus, Rio first started walking towards the forest. However, after ten minutes of walking around, he hadn't spotted any traces remaining.

Nothing in sight, huh. There were no signs of Lucius' blood spilled anywhere, nor any signs of Reiss trampling the grass with his feet. The aftermath of the earlier battle had left the forest in a mess, making it hard to spot something, but Rio was certain he hadn't missed anything.

...*Don't tell me they escaped into the city,* Rio thought, looking around the city wall next. However, there were no signs there either, so he headed for the west gate for now.

"...Sir Haruto?" Aria appeared in a casual manner, dressed in her combat-use attendant uniform and equipped with her enchanted sword. Her eyes widened slightly when she spotted Rio.

"What are you doing here, Aria?" Rio's eyes also widened.

"Things at the east gate have calmed down, so I was thinking of investigating the dragon-like creature that released that fiery breath. May I ask the same of you, Sir Haruto?"

"I received a request from Lady Liselotte to investigate the kidnapper," Rio replied, his explanation brief.

"A kidnapper, you say?" The normally unexpressive Aria widened her eyes in great interest.

"Earlier, the mansion was attacked by monsters. In the midst of that chaos, Princess Flora was kidnapped."

"...Princess Flora was kidnapped?" The unexpected information made Aria freeze, her voice showing a hint of doubt. Her reaction was understandable — Liselotte's estate should have been the safest place in Amande.

"The extermination of the surging monsters has already been completed. Lady Liselotte wasn't harmed in the slightest and I have already retrieved Princess Flora, so there is no need to worry in that regard."

"...I cannot thank you enough." Aria suddenly bowed her

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head toward Rio.

“It’s nothing worth thanking me for. I actually ended up fighting the kidnapper, but he managed to get away after I cornered him. Now that I’ve returned Princess Flora to the mansion, I’m back to search some more.”

“Is that so? In that case, the one who forced back the attack that came down from the sky was…”

“It was me. The culprit got away while I was leveraging a counterattack,” Rio said with a bitter smile.

“…I understand the situation now. If that is the case, then I shall assist in your investigation,” Aria offered.

“No, I’ve already finished my search. I was going to check on the state of the west gate before heading back to the mansion. Unfortunately, there were no traces left behind, so I do not believe the culprit is in the area.”

“Understood. Then I shall accompany you back to the mansion instead — that was my original intention. There are no problems at the west gate, so I believe it is fine if I continue with my mission and accompany you.” She still had many things she wanted to ask, but that would wait until they were on the move.

“I understand. Shall we go, then?” Rio asked.

“Yes,” Aria nodded her head respectfully.

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Rio and Aria ran through the city until they returned to Liselotte’s estate. Once they were within the grounds, they came across attendants Natalie and Cosette.

When Cosette realized it was Rio, she welcomed him with a beaming smile. “Sir Haruto, welcome.”

“Long time no see, you two,” Rio replied with a friendly smile.

“Thank you so much for what happened earlier, Sir Haruto,” Natalie thanked Rio politely.

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“It was a truly wonderful fight to witness. Thanks to you, we were able to eliminate the monsters surging the east gate,” Cosette praised Rio with a grin.

“I’m glad to be of help. However, it seemed like some of the humanoid monsters got inside the city…” Rio said with a faint frown.

“The evacuation of the residents had already been completed, so thankfully nothing big came out of it. Also, I heard that you defeated several of the monsters that made it into the middle of the city too,” Natalie said, bowing in gratitude.

Rio smiled gently. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Allow us to lead you to our master. Please, come this way,” Cosette said, taking the initiative to become Rio’s guide.

At that, Aria finally opened her mouth to declare her presence in exasperation. “You know, I’m here too…”

“Oh, if it isn’t Aria. Why are you with Sir Haruto?” Cosette asked her curtly.

“I was checking out the northwest city wall on my way back to the mansion when I bumped into him,” Aria replied with a small sigh.

“Ah, investigating the location of that breath attack.” Natalie inclined her head.

Cosette shot Aria a smug look before directing her question at Rio. “There’s no doubt that Sir Haruto was the one that forced it back, yes?”

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“Yes, somehow,” Rio nodded with a strained smile.

“So I heard on the way here.” Aria had already learned this on the way, so she wasn’t particularly surprised. Instead, she watched Rio’s side profile.

“Leave the idle chit-chat here and quickly show Sir Haruto to our master,” she ordered Cosette and Natalie.

“As you wish,” the two of them agreed respectfully.

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The attendants led Rio to an area with several pavilions set up; a field hospital where the wounded were carried. Inside one of the tents, Liselotte and several of her attendants were using *Cura* to heal the wounded as assistants circled around them in feverish haste.

“Sir Haruto. Aria.” Liselotte was in the middle of healing a severely wounded soldier with a serious face, but she immediately noticed Rio and called out to them.

“Please pay me no mind and continue your treatment,” Rio urged.

“Much obliged. But I’m almost done anyway, so please wait there for a moment. ...Okay, all done.” Liselotte confirmed that the wound on the soldier’s abdomen was completely closed before deactivating her healing magic.

“T-Thank you very much, Lady Liselotte! O-Oww?!” The soldier immediately tried to spring up to thank Liselotte. However, he was soon reminded of the pain in his stomach and grimaced.

“Didn’t I just tell you that the wound may still open, so make sure you avoid rigorous movement for a few days? Don’t even think about using your stomach muscles. It was a pretty deep wound, you know,” Liselotte said with a sigh.

“I-I have no excuse.” The soldier hung his head in shame.

“Okay. If you feel anything weird, call one of the attendants nearby immediately. Now, take care of yourself,”

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Liselotte said, standing up with a grin. The soldier that received treatment was completely distracted, watching Liselotte's retreating back with a sloppy expression. Meanwhile, the other wounded men were glaring at that soldier in jealousy.

Liselotte ignored the conversations going on behind her. "Sorry for the wait, Sir Haruto. Lady Cecilia and Lady Aishia are assisting the healing efforts in the tent next to us. Let's move there first."

"Are you sure you can leave?" Rio looked around the room.

"Yes. The rest will be left to the three over there. And you're back too, Aria," Liselotte beamed, looking over at Aria, Natalie, and Cosette.

"Yes. I just arrived with Sir Haruto," Aria replied.

"With Sir Haruto?" Liselotte tilted her head.

"We ran into each other by coincidence," Rio explained.

"I dropped by the northwest area after cleaning up the monsters at the west gate," Aria added.

"I see. Do you have anything urgent to report on your side?"

Aria shook her head quietly. "...Nothing that can't wait until later. I shall report the details to you at a later time."

"Okay, sounds good. Then, Sir Haruto — please come this way."

"Understood." Rio followed Liselotte out of the tent.

"By the way, Sir Haruto. Did you find any hints about the kidnapper?" Liselotte asked, stopping outside of the tent.

"No. He should have suffered fairly fatal wounds, and yet I didn't even see any stains of blood." Rio shook his head in disappointment.

"Is that so... At any rate, I would like to organize all the information first. Extermination of the monsters at the east and west gate is pretty much completed, and the situation has settled a bit, but we cannot relax yet. I'm sorry to ask

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this, but could you tell me more at a later time with Princess Flora and Duke Huguenot in attendance?" Liselotte asked with an apologetic face.

"Of course — I have no objections," Rio said readily.

"Thank you very much. Fortunately, the attendants dispatched to every area of the city have started to return, so the mansion won't be lacking personnel any longer. There's no need for you and your friends to trouble yourselves anymore. I will arrange for a room where you can rest immediately." There was no way Rio and his companions could return to their room at the inn in this situation.

Rio decided to obediently accept Liselotte's offer. "...I understand. I will gladly take you up on that."

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Chapter 3: A Discussion and a Request

After Rio met up with Celia and Aishia, Liselotte led the three of them to a guest suite inside the mansion.

The guest suite consisted of a spacious living room, three bedrooms, and even a small kitchen and bathroom — making it a little more extravagant than the suite at the inn they stayed at. She also offered to assign them their own personal attendant, but they immediately turned down the offer politely.

At present, Rio was preparing tea while the two girls gathered at the living room sofa. Once Rio was seated, he looked at Aishia and Celia. “Now, I’d like to confirm what information the two of you have and exchange some of my own. If there’s anything you’d like to report or anything you’re curious about, please make sure you speak up.”

“Okay. But that’s easier said than done. I don’t even know where to start. It was all such a disaster,” Celia nodded with a slightly unwell expression. Having witnessed the damage first-hand, she must have been worried about those from the Beltrum Kingdom.

Rio sensed what Celia was feeling turmoil over and took the initiative to broach the subject. “...Then, there’s one thing I’d like to report first.”

“What is it?” Celia asked. Aishia listened silently.

“It is most likely... No, almost certain that my identity has been revealed to Princess Flora,” Rio confessed uncomfortably.

Celia looked shocked. “...Huh?”

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“Princess Flora has an idea of who I am, with almost certain accuracy,” Rio repeated, as his words were of the utmost importance.

Naturally, Celia was panicked. “W-Why?! Is that okay?”

“I can’t be sure, but it’s fine… I think. Unless my judgment was wrong and Princess Flora has the type of personality to spread rumors everywhere, that is,” Rio replied in near self-mockery. Celia, however, was awfully confused and thought an explanation was in order.

“W-Wait! Hold it! Why was it revealed in the first place?”

“The kidnapper that had history with me said my name in front of Princess Flora. He didn’t give enough information to completely declare it was me, but it seems like Princess Flora is strongly convinced of her own judgment…” Rio explained with a bitter smile.

“Did you confess to her? That you’re Rio?” Celia asked fearfully. She was curious about the man Rio had a past with too, but Flora was more important right now.

“No. I made a vague comment to go along with her, then explained it as being two different people.”

“W-What does that mean, exactly?”

“I accepted the fact I had another name — Rio — then informed her that my name was now Haruto and asked her to forget that Rio is another name of mine.”

“…What did Princess Flora say to that?”

“…She apologized and accepted it as her misunderstanding, while crying,” Rio replied with difficulty.

“I… see… Okay.” Celia looked terribly frustrated, but accepted that answer nonetheless.

Rio frowned at the resurfacing memory of Flora’s crying face. “…Do you think it would be dangerous to believe in Princess Flora?”

“No. Princess Flora wouldn’t spread that needlessly. That’s what I believe,” Celia offered with a fleeting smile. She had spoken to Flora numerous times herself on a

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personal basis, so she knew fairly well that she didn't have that kind of personality. Not to mention that she felt extremely guilty about what had happened to Rio…

For a moment, Celia hesitated over whether to tell Rio what Flora felt, but nothing would change in the short-term even if she did. Imagining how her former student must have felt hurt Celia's heart, but she didn't want to give Rio unnecessary knowledge to make him worry more right now.

For some strange reason, I felt happy when I saw Rio talking to Princess Flora and Roanna… I'm no good, honestly. Celia sighed deeply. It was extremely difficult to repair a relationship that had warped to that extent.

"…And there's also another thing I'm late to report on, but I've been able to identify one of the heroes I was searching for," Rio said after a brief pause.

"Oh, really?" Celia said in surprise.

"Yes. I heard it yesterday, when I was having a meal with Liselotte and Duke Huguenot. I'm assisting a little more in the investigations for the incident this time, but once that's done I'm thinking of visiting Miharu… The people that were summoned from another world. It may be dangerous to remain in this city, too."

"I see…"

"By the way, it should take about two to three weeks for me to go to Miharu and back."

Celia nodded. "Got it."

"In that time, I think you and Aishia should wait somewhere. I know it hasn't been long since you fled the Kingdom of Beltrum, so I'm very sorry for making you go through this… Aishia, you too. Sorry," Rio said regretfully.

"Don't worry about it. There are some things I want to think about too." Celia gave a fleeting smile and shook her head.

"I'm fine too. Leave it to me." Aishia gave an earnest nod.

"Thank you." Rio smiled at Aishia, before looking closely

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at Celia. “That’s all from me, but do you have any questions?”

“…Umm,” Celia opened her mouth quietly after a pause.

“Yes, what is it?”

“What happened between you and that man who abducted Princess Flora? You said you had a past…” Celia asked Rio hesitantly, watching his expression.

“…” Rio made a troubled face, wondering what to reply with.

“Ah, of course, if you don’t want to say then you don’t have to tell me anything, okay? I was just a little curious, that’s all,” Celia said in a fluster.

Rio steadied his resolve and responded calmly. “No, it’s just that the past we have isn’t exactly a fun story to listen to. Do you still want to hear it? If the Professor wants to hear it, then I’ll tell you.”

“…Yeah,” Celia nodded slowly.

“Okay,” Rio assented. “Lucius is the target of my revenge. Before I became an orphan in Beltrum, I had my mother killed right before my eyes by this man, and it is possible my father met a similar fate by him too.” He tried to state the truth as flatly as possible.

Celia paled with a gasp. “I-I’m sorry! For asking about something so painful…” She had expected a certain degree of tragedy from Rio’s behavior, but the truth was so shocking she reflexively apologized.

“No, I wish there was a better way of telling you, but I had always intended on telling you the truth if you asked, Professor. Don’t worry about it,” Rio laughed uncomfortably.

“R-Really?” Celia peered at Rio’s face.

“Yes. Once you had found out a glimpse of the relationship between Lucius and I, it’d only be natural to feel curious, and I didn’t want to lie to you if at all possible,” Rio said, the smile at his lips a little sad.

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“I… I see. Did you know about this, Aishia?” Celia’s voice squeaked in shock as she looked at Aishia.

“I knew,” Aishia confirmed in a flat tone.

“I see…” Celia seemed a little relieved at that, sighing quietly in acceptance.

“If possible, I hope you can keep what I have just said between just the three of us,” Rio said. Not even Miharu nor Sara and the others knew. It wasn’t a topic one would want spread around.

Celia paused for a brief moment, then nodded deeply. “…Yeah, I got it. But can I ask one more thing?”

“Yes?”

“Do you hate him, Rio?”

“…I don’t think I could forgive him, but my emotions are a little different from hatred or disgust. I can’t explain it all that well,” Rio contemplated with a slightly troubled look. His feelings were no longer definable on a scale of hatred or disgust anymore. The notion of killing Lucius had become a fixed concept within Rio’s mind. He saw nothing but his goal of killing. That was his resolute decision.

“What does…?” Celia cocked her head dubiously.

“I can’t forgive him, but constantly cursing him would grow tiring. It may sound contradictory, but my feelings are much more indifferent than that. It’s just that I’ve already reached an answer within myself, like I’ve decided to face this without running… I cannot explain it with logic,” Rio said, smiling as though he was over it. Celia watched Rio’s confident nature, but still cocked her head dubiously.

“Okay… I see. Fine, then. Thank you for telling me.” Celia smiled gently and nodded.

Of course, it wasn’t because she had completely understood Rio and agreed with him. As someone who had never been in a similar environment, there was no way for Celia to see through the particulars of Rio’s feelings in the first place.

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However, Celia knew Rio. She knew what kind of person he was, which was why she could trust him. While she wasn't without worries or anxieties, she trusted Rio unconditionally and believed that that was the way to respect someone.

Rio looked awkward, but still relaxed his mouth into a smile. "I should be the one saying that. Thank you very much."

"Not at all. You can come to me anytime if you want to talk about anything, you know?" Celia peered at Rio's face.

"Yes. The same goes for you, Professor. About your future," Rio nodded and said in return.

"...Yup. I'll spend some time thinking about it." Celia also looked a little awkward as she nodded bashfully.

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Afterwards, Rio and the girls spent some time in the room relaxing after the tense encounters that had taken place that day. They drank tea together, took a nap, had a meal, and before they knew it, it was nighttime.

It was at that time that Natalie, the attendant, visited the guest suite they were staying at.

"Sir Haruto, I apologize for disturbing you after your dinner, but would you have a moment? My master wishes to speak with you," Natalie said.

"Understood," Rio replied immediately, and headed towards Liselotte. Celia and Aishia remained in the guest suite.

"Lady Liselotte, Sir Haruto has arrived," Natalie announced with a knock after leading Rio to the meeting room.

"Come in," Liselotte's reply came immediately.

"After you, Sir Haruto." Natalie opened the door and gestured for Rio to go inside.

"If you would excuse me," Rio gave a single bow and

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entered the room. Other than Liselotte, Duke Huguenot, Flora, Hiroaki, and Roanna were also in the room. Furthermore, Aria was also present. As soon as Rio appeared, Flora reacted by shaking her body with a flinch.

“Thank you for coming, Sir Haruto. I apologize for summoning you so late,” Liselotte said in welcome. She must have been exhausted at this point, as she didn’t look all that well.

“It’s no problem at all.” Rio shook his head in a friendly manner.

Liselotte gestured for Rio to take a seat. “Please.” And so, Rio took a seat at the round table set up in the meeting room.

“We really have been greatly indebted to you, Haruto. I’m not sure how we could ever repay you enough,” Duke Huguenot said with a somewhat apologetic laugh, already seated at the table.

Rio shook his head with a faint smile. “There is no need for that. How are your injuries?”

“All well, thanks to you. It appears I will have no hindrance to my daily life.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“This may be repetitive, but we truly want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Considerations for your reward are underway, but first let us discuss the incident in detail.”

When Duke Huguenot indicated his intention to give a reward, Rio paused for a faint moment before assenting. “…Understood.” Thus, the topic promptly shifted to discussion of the incident.

“Umm, Sir Haruto,” Flora said.

“What is it?” Rio responded without delay.

“Thank you very much, with regards to what transpired,” Flora said, bowing her head deeply to Rio.

“I’d like to extend you my gratitude once more too. Thank

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you very much for saving Princess Flora." Roanna immediately bowed her head to Rio as well.

"It was no problem at all." Rio didn't seem to want the conversation to drag out, as he omitted any unnecessary preamble and briefly shook his head.

Meanwhile, Hiroaki had remained silent the entire time up until this point. "...It seems you were sure busy this time."

"Are you in better health now too, hero? I had heard that you fell unconscious after releasing your power..." Rio asked while examining Hiroaki's face.

"Who knows. You say that, but all I did was exterminate a couple of those cockroach-like monsters before spending the rest of the time sleeping. The one who had the biggest spotlight defeating minotaurs and rescuing Flora was you, wasn't it?" Hiroaki said in a blunt, sulking tone. His words almost sounded like he was jealous of Rio's achievements.

...*What's that about?* Rio couldn't understand why Hiroaki was in a bad mood, so he tread carefully.

"I highly doubt that to be the case..."

"No no, your stocks are only soaring higher. There are rumors about you circulating everywhere in the mansion. It's almost like the birth of a new hero. Right, Flora?" Hiroaki said, suddenly addressing the princess.

"Eh? Ah, y-yes." Surprised, Flora nodded along on the spur of the moment.

"See? Told you." Hiroaki shrugged his shoulders, unimpressed.

"Sir Haruto, your tea." Aria approached Rio and quietly placed tea on the table. Beneath the teacup was a piece of paper with writing on it.

Rio narrowed his eyes when he spotted the letter under the cup. He wondered if it was Aria's writing; it was written in excellent penmanship. *After witnessing the attendants praising your contributions, combined with the fact his*

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own efforts fell short, he has been left in a bit of a sulky mood. The fact that Princess Flora has taken an interest in you has also been another source of his bad mood. We apologize for the trouble.

There was no need for Aria to be the one apologizing at all. It was more likely that Hiroaki had been the one to demand his presence at their meeting, and there was no way for anyone to deny him.

I see. Rio understood what Hiroaki must be feeling and thanked Aria courteously. Meanwhile —

Bah, what is this? This dull, dull feeling… Like having a newbie join and receive clear favoritism from their superiors right away. Nothing kills the mood more than this… Hiroaki's eyes must have been clouded with envy, as his thoughts were completely unreasonable.

It was true that giving preferential treatment to a newbie with no achievements whatsoever could only be interpreted as favoritism. It was an action that would antagonize the senior figures that had supported the organization until now, in some way or another.

However, it was a different story when that newbie had already shown more outstanding results than the senior figures, objectively proving their worth and capability. Any good organization would give such talented figures a befitting amount of appreciation.

If anything, it would be a problem if an incompetent person was valued more highly than a talented person. Organizations were not formed from machines, after all. If incompetence was praised and talent ignored, the talented people would naturally feel discontent. There were plenty of other opportunities to be had by talented people, so only the incompetent ones would inevitably remain in the organization.

Of course, there were some cases of organizations placing higher value on areas other than visible results, but he

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wasn't a psychic. There was no way he could see through that; he wouldn't know unless it was indicated as such. Not to mention that Rio was a person outside of the organization. For Liselotte and Duke Huguenot, he was their savior and the largest contributor to the relief efforts, making him someone they wanted to get closer to by all means. He had achieved results that were objectively impossible to fault, so it was only natural for him to be praised. Or rather, they would be distancing themselves from Rio if they didn't, which would make Liselotte lose face.

That was why Hiroaki's discontent towards the warm hospitality being shown to Rio was simply being misdirected. Or rather, if he was envious, then he should have used that envy as a driving force instead. But Hiroaki lacked the spirit for that.

Ah yes, the neutral side character that appears later than the main character while being stronger too. The one that has to ruin the overpowered uniqueness of the main character, right? What a drag.

Hiroaki disapproved of Rio from whatever point of view he could think of. In his head, he was being logical, but the fact his evaluation was based off his emotions meant it was anything but.

"Hah," Hiroaki sighed dramatically.

Liselotte watched him with a somewhat fed up look in her eyes. She was the one who wanted to sigh, after all. Even Duke Huguenot was frowning a little, ill at ease.

Roanna's face was slightly panicked, having realized the situation wasn't good. Flora's entire attention was focused on Rio, so she didn't have any room left to care about Hiroaki right now.

However, Hiroaki's value as a hero was far too great to just ignore. It would be a problem to have him sulk forever over such a trivial matter, not to mention annoying.

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I believe it would be best to proceed with the discussions.

Agreed.

Liselotte and Duke Huguenot reached a mutual understanding with an exchange of eye contact. They had already settled what topics to discuss in advance, so their plans were already laid out.

They actually wanted to use this chance to discuss the reward too, but it would have to wait for another time when Hiroaki wasn't present. "Now that Haruto is here, let us get straight into the main topic at hand. What I wish to discuss with you is about the mercenary, Lucius. I know some things about that man's background," Duke Huguenot said.

"...Is that so?" Rio gazed in wonder at the unexpected source of information about Lucius.

"I have heard that you have a certain past with this Lucius man. There may be information useful to you among this."

"I am most grateful." Rio bowed once and waited for the conversation to continue.

"I do not know where Lucius conducts his activities now, but he was originally from a lower class noble family in our kingdom. His family name was Orgueil. The house fell a long time ago, though," Duke Huguenot explained.

"Haruto, were you..."

"I was unaware." Rio shook his head slowly.

"Which means you only know of Lucius as a mercenary, then. It is most likely that you met him after his family had fallen out of grace, then. On the other hand, I only know of what he was like before that..." Duke Huguenot said, examining Rio closely.

"...I only knew him for a brief period of time, when I was a child. I do not have any direct knowledge of what he was doing as a mercenary."

"I see... Then let me fill you in a little on what he was like when he was a noble. Lucius Orgueil was a former candidate for the position of the King's Sword, competing neck and

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neck with the current King's Sword, Sir Alfred Emarle," Duke Huguenot explained.

"That means his ability as a swordsman was fairly high, then," Liselotte confirmed.

"Yes. If I recall correctly, there were some who believed that he would have been selected as the King's Sword if his family status had been more favorable. I personally didn't find Sir Alfred's abilities lacking in any way, but our kingdom values more aspects than just ability," Duke Huguenot said, huffing in a self-mocking sneer. His gaze was directed at Aria, who was formerly a lower class noble of Beltrum. Aria received Duke Huguenot's gaze with her usual unconcerned look.

"The reason why Lucius wasn't selected as the King's Sword was because his family fell before the selection. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the fate of the Orgueil house rested on Lucius' shoulders at the time, but the house reached its limit before anything could happen. Although, there are rumors suspecting that their ruin was directly caused by certain circumstances where exterior pressure was being exerted. Well... Who knows what the truth is," Duke Huguenot added in his eloquent way of speaking.

"...What kind of path do nobles that lose their house normally pursue?" Rio asked.

"Falling into ruin is an extreme disgrace for a noble. Not all doors are closed to them afterwards, but their lives have basically ceased to exist. There are many cases where the whole house commits suicide or are never seen again. Of course, there are those among them like Aria, who distinguish themselves instead. Lucius belongs to that select group," Duke Huguenot explained.

"Considering the incident this time, it may be possible that this Lucius man holds a strong grudge towards Beltrum Kingdom," Liselotte said, offering a hypothesis.

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“You think that may be the motive behind Princess Flora’s abduction?” asked Rio.

“Yes. Of course, there may be a motive beyond personal reasons, but I’d like to hear what Sir Haruto thinks after actually fighting this Lucius,” Liselotte said, seeking Rio’s opinion.

“…I’m not sure. However, I believe he prioritized his own pleasure when it came to the fight with me — someone he was connected to — over the abduction of Princess Flora.” Rio offered his impressions as he looked back on the series of events up to their fight.

“What kind of a person did this Lucius seem like to you, Sir Haruto?” Liselotte looked at Rio and asked.

“He was a monster in a human skin. Cunning and calculative, he seems to move in a logical manner, but actually takes illogical actions in pursuit of his own pleasure. A savage and devious man,” Rio stated bluntly.

“If you think that of him, then…” Liselotte’s eyes widened faintly. From what she had heard so far, he seemed like a terrible person. Even though he didn’t seem like the type to openly speak ill of others, Rio had gone out of his way to say just that, so he must have a particularly deep connection with Lucius. This meant that in order to support this personal criticism, there was a need to know how Rio and Lucius were related, but the topic was rather delicate and made it difficult to ask. If it was just a matter of asking and being refused, then it would be fine, but she wanted to avoid upsetting him. That being said, as reluctant as she was, she had no other choice but to ask right now. She’d just have to prepare herself for the worst.

With that thought, Liselotte opened her mouth, when —

“Excuse me. I apologize if this is an intrusive question, but may I inquire as to what kind of connection Sir Haruto has with this man called Lucius?” Roanna, who had been listening silently until now, suddenly asked. Perhaps she had

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read the mood in the air and realized it would be safer for her to ask than Liselotte or Duke Huguenot, who were in positions of negotiation that could potentially occur in the future.

Rio kept an uncomfortable smile on his face as he answered. "…My mother was killed before my very eyes."

It wasn't a past he wanted to tell people, but he couldn't refuse to answer considering the situation they were in. However, the past that he revealed was so tragic, Roanna turned white as a ghost and apologized in a panic. "…I-I am so very sorry."

"No, there's nothing to apologize for," Rio replied immediately.

"Ah… Well, like Liselotte said, if he's doing this out of resentment for the Kingdom of Beltrum, then he must be quite the petty man." Even Hiroaki felt pity for the awkward question Roanna had asked and tried to change the topic.

A-Are you one to talk, acting all jealous over Sir Haruto mere moments ago? Liselotte thought tiredly, but didn't say anything out loud. Humans were terrible at objectively looking at themselves, after all. Anyway, if Hiroaki hadn't supported Roanna there, Liselotte would have spoken up herself.

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Instead, Liselotte looked at Duke Huguenot and proceeded with the discussion. “That still isn’t certain yet. I’m also interested in this man called Reiss that Sir Haruto and Princess Flora mentioned…”

“I’ve also heard of the name Reiss before. It’s the name of the Proxia Empire diplomat who was secretly communicating with the house of Duke Arbor. Or course, it may just be two people with the same name…” Duke Huguenot murmured, and Liselotte turned to address Rio.

“Princess Flora said that his face was hidden by a hood, but were you able to catch a glimpse of his appearance at all, Sir Haruto…?”

“No, I couldn’t see anything either. Even if I had seen the face of that Proxia Empire diplomat, there’s no guarantee they are the same person,” Rio shook his head apologetically. He could make a presumption based on stature and voice, but there wasn’t enough decisive evidence to prove it.

“Which means it would be more reliable to pursue Lucius’ tracks, whose background we understand,” Liselotte suggested.

Duke Huguenot seemed to have no objections. “I will gather my forces and investigate to see whether anyone among them has had any points of connection with him in the past or present. It will require a trip back to Rodania, though.”

“Thank you for your efforts. I will put an inquiry in at the adventurer’s guild just in case, but if he has suspended his mercenary activities, I don’t believe there will be much chance of success.” Liselotte bowed her head deeply in request.

Various discussions continued after that, and another hour passed before they dispersed.

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The next morning, Rio was once again summoned by Liselotte. Instead of the meeting room from last night, he was led into a drawing room.

“Thank you for coming, Sir Haruto. Please, have a seat,” Liselotte welcomed Rio brightly. Present in the room was the head attendant Aria, Duke Huguenot, and Flora. There was no sign of Hiroaki or Roanna.

“Excuse me. What is everyone gathered here for, if I may ask?” Rio asked, then sat down on a loveseat. They should have concluded all discussions about the monster attack and Lucius last night.

“If it isn’t too much of a bother to you, we wanted to ask what your plans are for the future, and also discuss various things relating to your reward.” Liselotte sat on the single-seater sofa opposite to Rio and stated their business. Flora was seated on the sofa next to her, while the one beside that sat Duke Huguenot.

“I’ve actually had some urgent matter suddenly come up, so I was thinking of leaving Amande within the next few days,” Rio informed.

“Urgent matter, you say?”

“Yes. I plan on heading to the Galarc Kingdom capital, Galtuuk, first.”

“...Is that so? In that case, we must prepare our tokens of gratitude for you with even more haste.” Liselotte had wanted Rio to remain in Amande so that they could deepen their relationship, but she couldn’t make demands in this situation.

“I’m sure your hands must be full with the aftermath of the monster attack on Amande, Lady Liselotte. There’s no need for you to push yourself.” Rio shook his head gently.

“I cannot allow things to settle like that — We are only here now because of your efforts. Rewarding you should be my highest priority,” Liselotte said.

“Is there anything you desire? To be honest, your merits

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have been so great, we've been having a little trouble determining how to reward you. Of course, Liselotte and I fully intend on rewarding you separately. Whether it is status or money, we will gladly prepare whatever is within our abilities for you. If you have any requests, I'd like to hear them," Duke Huguenot said smoothly.

"..." Flora stared at Rio's face fixedly.

"I... see." Rio contemplated for a moment, before speaking up. "In that case, there is one thing I would like to request of Lady Liselotte."

"Yes?" Liselotte returned Rio's gaze directly.

"If it is possible, could you allow me to participate in the banquet where the heroes are to be introduced?"

"The banquet where the heroes are to be introduced... The banquet being held at our kingdom's royal castle. Is that correct? And you want to attend yourself, Sir Haruto?" Taken aback by the unexpected request, Liselotte looked at Rio carefully as she confirmed what he'd said.

"Yes. I wish to meet Lady Satsuki Sumeragi." Rio nodded, stating his objective shortly.

"...May I ask why?"

"I'm sorry. I know that this is impudent of me, and for that I am most ashamed, but could I ask that you refrain from asking my reason as part of my reward? Of course, I have absolutely no intention of harming the hero in any way, and will explain the situation properly when the right time comes," Rio said, bowing his head deeply to Liselotte.

Liselotte paused for a long moment before resolving herself and accepting. "...I understand. It should be possible for you to accompany me when I go."

If a person of unclear background was taken to the banquet hosted by the king and queen themselves and caused an issue, everything would fall on Liselotte's head, which was why requests like Rio's would normally be out of the question. However, her debt to Rio was equivalently as

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large as his request was outrageous.

“Thank you very much.” Rio bowed his head deeply to Liselotte once more.

Liselotte shook her head with a cheerful smile. “Not at all. I will eagerly await the time when we can talk more about this.”

Duke Huguenot, who had been watching the exchange between Rio and Liselotte silently, finally spoke up. “...Hmm, it seems like the reward from Liselotte has been decided. Now, may I hear what you request from us?”

Flora seemed nervous, as her expression was rather stiff as she stared at Rio.

Rio looked between Duke Huguenot and Flora. “...To be honest, I cannot think of anything at the moment.”

“Hmm. So you’d like hold onto the request for later. Is that correct?” Duke Huguenot asked, confirming the gist of Rio’s statement.

“Yes. I would be grateful if you could lend me your assistance if I were to need it in the future.”

“...Understood,” Duke Huguenot nodded with a wry smile, surprised at how indifferent he seemed. Meanwhile, Flora seemed to have an opinion about that, as she was watching Rio with a vexed expression.

“My reward is also lacking with just an invitation to the banquet. When you need assistance, please rely on what power I have too,” Liselotte offered immediately.

“I would appreciate that greatly.” Rio smiled warmly.

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Two days later...

It was morning when Rio departed from Amande with Aishia and Celia. At present, they were standing outside the mansion entrance and being sent off. The ones seeing them off were Liselotte, Flora, and Duke Huguenot, along with

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Hiroaki and Roanna. Furthermore, Aria, Natalie, Cosette, Chloe, and all the attendant ladies of the estate had lined up.

"Thank you all for everything. To be sent off by so many people is an honor." Rio bowed once, facing Liselotte and the rest. Behind him, Aishia and Celia, who had their faces hidden by their hoods, bowed similarly.

Liselotte gave her cheerful words of parting on behalf of everyone present. "We should be the ones thanking you. We shall look forward to seeing you again in a month and a half, on the date that we agreed on."

"Yes, thank you very much," Rio replied with a smile.

"I would love to talk to you two some more as well, if that is to your liking!" Liselotte said while looking at Aishia and Celia.

In the end, Aishia and Celia had been shut away in their rooms the entire time so that most of the people in the mansion, including Liselotte, never interacted with them during their stay. There was the fact that Rio hadn't tried to put the two of them in the spotlight, but with Aishia having close combat abilities on par with Rio and Cecilia being such a remarkable sorcerer, Liselotte's curiosity was piqued. At the very least, she thought she could venture with a little greed and ask for another opportunity to make contact with them.

"Yes. If the opportunity arises, then gladly." Celia nodded amiably with a charming smile. Aishia was silent, but nodded too.

"..." Most of the men and women standing on Liselotte's side found their gazes captivated. After all, from what they could see, both Aishia and Celia had beauty that couldn't normally be seen on an everyday basis. Liselotte and her attendants were also a gathering of beautiful girls, but most of them accepted the fact that they came in second in terms of appearances. The only attendant on par would probably be Aria. Otherwise, there was Flora and Liselotte, followed

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by Roanna as runner-up. Hiroaki's mouth was open as he stared at Aishia and Celia in a daze.

...*Huh, she looks familiar for some reason?* Aria tilted her head in suspicion, watching Celia's face. Celia seemed to notice her gaze, and her expression grew a bit awkward.

When Rio realized that too, he urged for their departure. "We will be going now, then."

"Yes, please take care. Thank you for everything you have done," Liselotte said, clutching her skirt gracefully and bowing her head. The attendants behind her all lowered their heads, seeing Rio and the others off.

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Chapter 4: Your Shadow

Once Rio, Celia, and Aishia left Amande through the east gate, they proceeded walking east down the main road. After some time passed, they confirmed that no one was around them before taking off into the sky. They continued through the air towards Galtuuk, the capital of the Kingdom of Galarc, and arrived at the outskirts of the capital before sunset. After they'd searched the rocky areas of the outskirts for somewhere isolated, they set up the rock house.

Celia sat down on the living room sofa and stretched. "It feels like it's been a while since I've lived in this house."

"We only stayed for a few days, but a lot happened in our time at Amande." Rio placed the tea he had prepared down on the table and agreed with a smile of amusement.

"...Yeah. It feels kind of strange. I've only lived in this house for a short time, but it feels like I've come home," Celia said keenly.

"Thank you for saying that. Maybe it's because there's no one else around, so you can mentally relax," Rio guessed.

"Yeah, that must be it." Celia nodded bashfully.

"Also because we can start taking baths again, and eating meals together with Haruto," Aishia interrupted. Celia giggled, agreeing along happily.

"Ah, that's true — you're right there. I look forward to that."

"I have to leave for a while starting tomorrow, so we'll only be able to eat together tonight and tomorrow morning, but I'll put my everything into cooking tonight. Professor, Aishia, you can relax and take a bath in the meantime," Rio suggested to the two of them.

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“…Mm, that’s a tempting idea, but could you teach me how to cook tonight? You promised me before, remember?” Celia asked, her cheeks turned a faint shade of crimson.

“Of course. I don’t mind at all, but wouldn’t you rather we do it at a less rushed time?” If she was cooking for the first time, it’d be better to learn continuously for a few days in a row. Rio would be leaving tomorrow, so there wasn’t much he could teach in just one lesson.

“Nope. I’ll be living together with Aishia while you’re gone. Aishia can cook some simple foods, but I should be able to make at least one thing myself, right? And I can practice while you’re gone too,” Celia said in slight embarrassment.

“…I understand. Then, let’s see if I can teach you some simple recipes,” Rio suggested with a gentle smile.

“Yup!” Celia responded happily, and the three of them made dinner together that night.

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The next morning, as Rio prepared to depart for the village…

“I’ll be going now,” he said after he’d stepped out of the rock house. “I’ll be gone for two weeks, so please look after each other.” He looked at Aishia as he spoke to Celia.

“Of course. Leave Aishia to me,” Celia said proudly.

“Will do. You take care too, Aishia,” Rio said with a chuckle.

“…Got it,” Aishia said, before suddenly hugging Rio.

“Wha?!” Rio himself was surprised, but Celia was even more surprised than him. Her eyes were round as she watched Aishia hug Rio dumbfoundedly.

“What’s wrong, Aishia?” Rio asked Aishia quietly. While the two of them were always close to each other, this was the first time they had hugged like this.

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“No matter how far we’re separated or where Haruto is heading towards, I will always be with you. So don’t fear, don’t falter, and go down the path that you choose,” Aishia said in a rare show of talkativeness. Her words were rather hesitant and vague, but Rio could make a guess at why she had chosen to speak like this. It was most likely because Rio had fulfilled his fated reunion with Lucius in such an unexpected way.

“…There’s nothing that gets past you, Aishia. Thanks,” Rio said a little awkwardly with a faint smile.

Ever since his fight with Lucius, the desire for revenge had been boiling intensely within Rio’s chest. Despite that, he had thought he had been behaving normally to those around him, but there was no fooling the one his soul was bound to. While it was a little awkward to have his own heart seen through so easily, it also felt comfortable for some reason. Rio obediently entrusted himself to Aishia’s embrace, but Celia returned to her senses with a gasp and spoke up in a panic. “H-Hey, hey! How long are you going to be hugging for?! That’s so unfair — let go already! I can’t let my guard down at all around you!”

“Okay.” Rio nodded in amusement and slowly distanced himself from Aishia.

“I was just saying my farewells. Aren’t you going to do that, Celia?” Aishia cocked her head sideways.

“N… R-Right. You’ll be gone for a while, s-so I guess…” Celia reflexively tried to decline, but then blushed as she agreed reluctantly.

“Well…” Rio tried to object, but Celia began to approach. Since he had been certain Celia would be too flabbergasted to do anything, Rio swallowed his words in slight surprise.

“…B-Be careful, Rio. I’ll practice the recipes you taught me and wait here!” With a bright red face, Celia hugged Rio with all her might. Celia’s body was small, but warm.

“…Yes. I’ll be back soon.” Rio smiled a little

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uncomfortably and returned Celia's hug.

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Rio moved a small distance away from the rock house and took out the teleport crystal. He could have used it in front of Celia, but if he did he could imagine how her panicked eyes would search Aishia for an explanation. Even if he told her about it beforehand, the discussion would've become pretty long-winded.

"*Transilio*." Rio chanted the spell and activated the teleport crystal in his hand. The air distorted and warped around the teleport crystal, vanishing Rio into thin air. In the next moment the forest surrounding the village filled his vision. His teleportation was successful.

"I'm sure someone will come here if I just wait, but..." He decided to approach the village himself this time. Kicking off the ground, Rio rose into the air with spirit arts and moved across the forest. The buildings of the village were lined in rows just below him, and towering past them was the giant tree that was Dryas' main body. Rio flew along leisurely, heading for the tree where the village's town hall was located — which was large, but nothing compared to the size of Dryas' tree. Before long, a large bird rose into the sky from the ground. It was Ariel, Orphia's contracted spirit.

"Onii-chan!"

And the first one to welcome Rio was, as expected, Latifa. As an adopted sister, she didn't want to give up that role to anyone else. Riding on the back of Ariel, she waved her arms enthusiastically from a dozen or so meters away. Orphia and Miharu were also on Ariel's back.

When Rio first spotted Latifa, his mouth softened in a smile, but when he spotted Miharu next, his face clouded faintly.

Miharu...

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He averted his eyes; he couldn't look at her directly. She was so bright, it felt like someone had a stranglehold on his chest.

"...?" Miharu noticed that Rio had averted his eyes and made a worried face. She continued staring at Rio's face after that, but he still refused to meet her gaze. In the meantime, Rio and Ariel made contact midair.

"Welcome back, Onii-chan!" Latifa called out with a beaming smile.

"...I've returned, Latifa. You look like you've been well," Rio replied with a gentle smile on his face.

"Yup!" Latifa nodded energetically.

"It's nice to see you again too, Orphia, Miharu. I'm not used to the sight of having the two of you come out to greet me; it's rather unexpected," Rio said to the two of them, somewhat shyly. This time, he was able to give his usual warm smile to Miharu without averting his gaze.

"Is that so? While you were gone from the village, we became really close friends. Isn't that right, Miharu?" Orphia giggled.

"Yup. We're always together, after all," Miharu said with a happy laugh. Perhaps the averted eye contact with Rio earlier was just her imagination...

"Say, Onii-chan. Can I jump over there?" Latifa pleaded restlessly, seemingly without the patience to wait until they arrived on the ground.

"Of course not — it's dangerous. It's just a little longer until we reach the ground. Be patient," Rio admonished Latifa with a wry smile.

"Hmph, why can't we go faster?" Latifa puffed up her cheeks a little and looked downwards. The town hall was already right before their eyes as the group slowly descended past it.

"Come to think of it, I don't see Lady Aishia with you..." Orphia said.

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“Aishia’s watching over the house back in Strahl.”

“Oh, really?” Orphia’s eyes widened.

“Yes. The teacher I am indebted to is actually under my protection right now, so we’re living together. She’s staying back to look after her, like an escort.”

“That indebted teacher is the one you mentioned before, right? The woman who was five years older. Her name was Celia, if I recall correctly?” Orphia asked. Latifa’s fluffy fox ears twitched when she heard that Rio was living with a young woman. However, she didn’t make any moves to interrupt their talk.

Rio’s eyes widened slightly. “Yes. You have a good memory.”

“Fufu. Of course I’d remember — it was something we discussed together. But that aside, why are you back this time? It hasn’t been that long since you last left…” Orphia said slightly bashfully, before tilting her head and changing the subject.

Rio looked at Miharu. “I’ve found the whereabouts of Miharu’s upperclassman, Sumeragi Satsuki. I wanted to report that and discuss my plans for the future, if possible.”

“…You found… Satsuki…” Miharu must have been quite shocked, as she was blinking with a blank look on her face.

“First I will go inform the head elders of my return, but then I’d like to have Aki and Masato join my explanation of the situation. Where are they right now?” Rio asked.

“Ah, I think they’re training with Sara and Alma right now,” Miharu answered with a gasp.

“But Sara and the others must have realized that Onii-chan’s returned, so maybe they’re heading towards the town hall already?” Latifa added.

“That’s true,” Orphia agreed. “I think we should just head to the town hall like this,” she said, gesturing for Rio to continue descending.

“I understand. Actually, I see them now.” Rio looked

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down at the square in front of the town hall and smiled when he spotted Sara and the others. A short time later, they reached the ground.

Latifa immediately went to hug Rio. “Once again, welcome home, Onii-chan!”

“Good to be back, Latifa. I’m glad to see you all look well, too, Sara.” Rio caught Latifa’s body with a smiling huff, then looked at Sara, who had come running over earlier.

“Welcome back, Rio.” Sara greeted Rio with a lively voice, either from running over or out of happiness at seeing Rio again. However, she wasn’t out of breath. Sara hadn’t endured all her tough training just to be out of breath from a little jog. Which meant the reason for her lively voice became obvious enough.

It was at that point that Alma finally appeared, dashing over with Masato and Aki in tow. Alma wasn’t particularly out of breath either, but Masato and Aki were huffing slightly.

“Sara was so fast, we could barely keep up,” Alma said tiredly while shooting Sara a look.

“Honestly. We have enough trouble as is running fast without magic artifacts,” Masato agreed with a grin.

“Ahaha,” Aki laughed in amusement, looking at Sara.

“Fufu, is that so? Why were you in such a rush, Sara?” Orphia asked, also laughing.

“I-I just didn’t want to lose sight of Rio, so I ran ahead of everyone to catch him first and wait for the others,” Sara answered in a high-pitched voice, having placed a strong emphasis on the fact that she’d done so for everyone’s sake.

“Geez, even if you didn’t hurry he would have waited. Right, Rio?” Orphia asked, turning to address Rio.

“Yes, there was something I wanted to tell Aki and Masato too, after all,” Rio said calmly with a nod.

“...To us?” Aki and Masato exchanged glances and looked at him in confusion.

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“I’ve found Satsuki’s location.”

“R-Really?! What about my brother?!” Aki stammered, being the first to react right away.

“Unfortunately, I still haven’t been able to locate your older brother…”

“I-Is that so…” Aki’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

“But now that we know Satsuki is here, it’s almost certain that your brother is in this world too. So far, all the heroes have been affiliated with a kingdom without exception, so I think it’s more than plausible.” While being affiliated with a kingdom brought up more problems in itself, Rio had said that to cheer up Aki. Latifa watched their exchange closely while still clinging to Rio.

“…Yes. Just knowing where Satsuki is makes me happy. It might be possible that my brother and Satsuki are together, or something,” Aki thought optimistically.

“That’s true. For now, I’d like to go to the head elders to make my report, so let’s continue discussing this there,” Rio suggested with a small smile.

“Yes!” Aki agreed enthusiastically. Meanwhile, Miharu had been staring at Rio’s side profile as he conversed with Aki.

“…” Her memories were vague and indistinct, but that dream she saw the other day… She couldn’t forget it. It was the trigger that caused her to strongly overlap this man and her childhood friend.

“What’s wrong, Miharu? …Miharu?” Because Latifa was clinging onto Rio, she felt the gaze Miharu had directed to him and called out to her.

“…Eh? What?” Miharu snapped back to her senses and tilted her head awkwardly.

“Nothing, you were just watching Onii-chan in a daze…” Latifa said, giving Miharu a searching look. Rio and the others were also drawn in by Latifa’s words and looked at

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Miharu.

“Ah, really? Was I doing that?” Miharu noticed that attention was gathering on her and ducked her head uncomfortably.

“…Oh, was it because you wanted to hug Onii-chan too, Miharu?” Latifa asked in a bright voice. At that, Sara, Orphia, and Alma all looked at Miharu with great interest.

“Huh? …Ah, no, that’s…” Miharu was taken aback, her body shaking with a flinch. When her eyes met Rio’s, she hid her face to avoid his gaze.

“Hey, Latifa. Don’t go picking on Miharu,” Rio warned her with a wry smile.

“…Okay!” Latifa agreed obediently and turned her gaze to Miharu to observe her expression.

“All right, let’s go then,” Rio urged the party to head towards the head elders.

Sara took the lead and agreed, walking towards the entrance of the town hall. “Yes, let’s.”

Orphia and Alma glanced at Miharu before following her. Similarly, Aki and Masato sent Miharu a look before walking off.

Before he started walking after Sara and the others, Rio stopped and looked down at the girl that still clung to him. “Are you not going to walk by yourself, Latifa?”

“Hmm… Then, can I hold hands with you, Onii-chan?” Latifa asked Rio like a spoiled child. She probably valued every short moment she could spend touching Rio, which was why she could speak so openly to him.

“Yeah, sure.” Rio nodded immediately.

“Yay! Ehehe.” Latifa’s features relaxed as she grabbed Rio’s left hand. Her expression was one of pure bliss.

“…” Miharu stood still as she watched their exchange.

“Shall we go, Latifa?” While Rio noticed Miharu’s gaze, he chose not to look at her and pulled Latifa’s hand as he walked off. Latifa seemed to sense that and nodded

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awkwardly as they walked, before looking back.

"Let's go, Miharu!"

"Ah, yeah. That's right." Miharu smiled widely and slowly started walking, but her gaze was still fixed on Rio's back —

"...Is that you, Haru-kun?" she whispered inaudibly at his back, but her voice must not have reached him, as Rio did not react.

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The group headed up to the top floor of the town hall to meet the three head elders of the village. Rio greeted them first, then told them about how he had located Satsuki, just as he had told Miharu and the others already.

"I see — I understand now. So what do you intend on doing, Lord Rio?" High elf Syldora asked Rio.

"In a month and a half's time, there will be a banquet to officially introduce the existence of the hero, Satsuki. I have actually made a connection with a certain noble that will allow me to attend that banquet."

"Ah, so you plan on meeting that Satsuki girl at that banquet, then?" Elder dwarf Dominic asked.

"Yes, that is correct," Rio replied. Ursula, the werefox head elder, looked doubtful.

"...But will it really go so smoothly?"

"It should. The other party is a fairly well-known noble of the Galarc Kingdom, and is aware of my aim to meet Satsuki. My request to accompany them to the banquet was accepted on top of that," Rio replied.

"I see. Did you tell them about Lady Miharu and the others?" Syldora asked with wide eyes. Rio shook his head slowly.

"No, I've kept Miharu's situation hidden."

At that, the head elders looked at each other and tilted their heads.

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“…It seems like the conditions are rather favorable for you, Lord Rio. Are you sure there is no ulterior motive here?” Syldora asked on behalf of the other head elders.

“While I can’t say for certain, there shouldn’t be. The time we spent together was short, but I believe the noble is intelligent with a strong sense of duty,” Rio said on his impression of Liselotte.

“I see. If you are going that far to describe them, then we shall trust the character of this person too,” Syldora said, smile widening with a chuckle.

“However, this will be a gathering of heroes and human royalty and nobility. There’s no way they would allow you entry for free, no? Just what series of events occurred for you to gain access to the banquet?” Dominic dug a little further in regards to how Rio’s invitation came to be. Despite his rough appearance, he was actually a thoughtful person who didn’t have the role of a head elder for nothing.

“I saved the noble in question during their crisis. I had partially assisted them for that intent, but it seemed like they felt very indebted and made such arrangements in gratitude.”

“I see. So that’s how it is,” Dominic smiled in understanding.

“Knowing your personality, they must have good judgment too,” Ursula said with a small smile. Syldora huffed and smiled, too.

“Well, we can hear more about that later over a drink or two. We now understand the general situation. Based on what you’ve told us, there is no need for us to intervene anywhere for now. Is that correct?” Dominic asked.

“Yes.”

“Indeed.”

Syldora and Ursula both responded immediately.

“That’s how it is. The main players are the young ones, after all. Of course, we’ll give you our opinions if needed, but

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it would be proper for you to discuss and decide among yourselves. How about that, Rio?" Dominic asked.

"Yes," Rio agreed. "That was what I intended too. Miharu, what do you think?"

"...I..." Miharu was unable to respond right away, a look of hesitation on her face. She returned the look Rio was giving her, but she bit her lip, at a loss for words.

"I-I want to see her! I want to see Satsuki! It's possible my brother might be with her, and even if he isn't, she might know something about him! I have to go and ask!" Aki said.

"Hmm..." Masato seemed to be thinking something, his arms crossed and a contemplative look on his face. Apparently, Aki was the only one with no doubt in her feelings.

"W-What's the matter, Masato? Don't you want to see our brother?"

"No, of course I want to see him. It's just... I'm still in the middle of my sword training, and it doesn't seem like we can come back that easily if we leave," Masato said.

"T-That's..." The look on Aki's face changed, making her speechless with discomfort. Even Aki didn't become emotional and say that Masato could continue his sword training elsewhere, because Aki knew that it wasn't about that. Masato was able to devote himself to his sword training in this village, where he had friends he could compete with. Aki herself had made irreplaceable friends in the village, and she had seen Masato work his hardest on his sword training. He probably didn't want to fail at it halfway through.

"Anyway, what good would come out of us going? We were brought to this village precisely because we'd get in Haruto's way, no?" Masato said, making a sound argument.

"That's true, but..." Aki was at a complete loss for words.

"You wouldn't be a nuisance at all. It might be difficult, but it's my job to do something about that. That's why I want to hear what the three of you truly think," Rio said in a

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calming voice. Masato and Aki exchanged glances before bowing their heads to Rio.

"…Thanks."

"Thank you very much."

Rio continued, "But there are several conditions attached, so I'll inform you of those first. After hearing them, take some time thinking about it, discussing it with each other, then give me your answer."

"O-Okay. What are they?" Masato braced himself and asked.

"First, the major premise of all this is that Satsuki is currently in a position of being a hero affiliated with the Galarc Kingdom — this is basically certain. The problem with being affiliated with a kingdom, however, is that she may not be able to move freely outside, and we can't just go and meet her easily. You understand this, right?"

By having the hero Satsuki — a disciple of the Six Wise Gods — affiliated with them, the kingdom could increase their own power and influence. Basically, she was a portable idol to worship.

It would be a bad move to upset Satsuki's mood, so the kingdom probably wouldn't do anything to provoke her. However, they would still keep Satsuki's movements under surveillance and indirectly try to manage her. It was hard to believe they would allow her to move freely.

"Yeah, pretty much," Masato said hesitantly. Aki and Miharu nodded in agreement too.

"I've told you about the Six Wise Gods before, right? They're the gods worshiped in the Strahl region. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the royalty in each of the kingdoms of Strahl were formed on the foundation of the Six Wise Gods' power. Now that the heroes — the disciples of the Six Wise Gods — have descended in each kingdom, they can't turn a blind eye to such a serious affair. The religious value of the heroes is directly connected to their political value, after all,"

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Rio explained plainly.

"…" Miharu, Aki, Masato, and the other spirit folk all listened to Rio's words intently.

"That, of course, applies to the Galarc Kingdom too. They will be trying to gain the most political benefit possible from Satsuki. Having said that, I'm sure you can imagine the potential dangers of the three of you suddenly appearing before Satsuki, right? The kingdom may try to take the three of you in as insurance, under the name of protection."

"Uh…" Aki and Masato both gulped.

"I phrased it in a frightening way, but of course taking actions to upset Satsuki would normally be a poor move, so I doubt they'd try to pull anything so forceful," Rio said with a bitter smile, shrugging his shoulders.

"That's why I'm not saying you shouldn't go meet Satsuki. But if you do go, I want you to be prepared. Just like Masato said, it's very possible that you may not be able to return to this village so easily afterwards," he continued.

"…Okay," Miharu and the others nodded solemnly.

"And that's all when it comes to the warnings I have to give. Of course, I'm willing to give my advice and present all the risks I can think of, but you all will make the final decision. I want to respect your opinions, which is why the three of you should think about it yourselves. And so I suggest we leave it at this for today," Rio said, wrapping up the meeting for the day.

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After that, the group decided to head home right away in order to give Miharu, Aki, and Masato time to think. A rather heavy air hung over them on the road home — over the Japanese visitors in particular, who barely said a word. Sara, Orphia, and Alma read the mood and decided to watch over them silently for now. Meanwhile, Latifa was similarly

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staying silent out of consideration, but her gaze was fixed on Rio rather than Miharu. She walked beside him quietly while holding his hand, occasionally looking up at Rio's face with a gentle look on her face.

Thus, the party arrived home.

"Since Rio's returned today, I'll do my best to make something nice for lunch," Orphia said with the brightest voice she could after entering the house.

"I'll help," Rio immediately offered.

"Ah, me too...!" Miharu chimed in, lured along by Rio to reflexively offer to help.

"No, Rio should relax in the living room, please. And Miharu, don't you have a lot to think about today? Leave this to me." Orphia shook her head with a cheerful grin.

"...Okay, then, if you insist." Rio nodded with a smile.

"Thank you, Orphia," Miharu said apologetically.

"My cooking skills aren't as good, but I'll help instead, Orphia."

"I can assist too."

Sara and Alma both took the initiative to help out.

"Yup, the three of us can make something together for once!" Orphia agreed happily.

"...Orphia, should I help too?" Latifa offered hesitantly.

"Fufu, you should go and be spoiled by Rio while you still have a chance," Orphia said with a smile. Latifa nodded with a soft smile of her own.

"Okay, thank you!"

Everyone went about their own business. Orphia, Sara, and Alma headed to the kitchen, while Rio and Latifa went to the living room and sat down on the sofa. Miharu, Aki, and Masato each retired to their own bedrooms.

Latifa seemed to be reading the mood in her own way, as she wasn't enthusiastically pleading for Rio's attention as usual, instead sticking close to Rio's side quietly. She must have felt completely at ease there, as Latifa fell into a

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peaceful sleep within ten minutes or so, her head in Rio's lap as she breathed gently in her sleep.

"Zzz… zzz…"

"…" The corners of Rio's mouth relaxed faintly as he watched Latifa's peacefully sleeping face while gently patting her head.

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Suddenly, Miharu appeared in the living room, and approached Rio nervously. Despite having noticed Miharu's approach, Rio continued to pet Latifa silently.

Miharu found her resolve and called out to Rio. "Umm, Haruto, do you have a moment?"

"...Yes, of course." Rio smiled a little fleetingly and slowly nodded his head.

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Rio shifted the sleeping Latifa to rest on the sofa before following Miharu outside the house, at her request to be alone.

Rio stopped a slight distance away from Miharu and spoke up first. "What did you want to talk about?"

"...Umm, I wanted to know what you were thinking about all this," Miharu began hesitantly.

"What I think?" Rio's eyes widened slightly as he cocked his head to the side.

"Yes. What do *you* think we should be doing about this? I want to hear your opinion," Miharu explained, clinging to Rio's response.

"...Let's see. I would attend the banquet alone and make contact with Satsuki. After hearing what Satsuki herself wants to do about all this, I'll explore long-term solutions for what to do. Then, at possibly the same time, I'll temporarily sneak Satsuki out of the castle and bring her to you guys, perhaps. Of course, I'll have to have you three wait somewhere near the castle." Rio offered what he considered to be the safest option.

"...That means you think we should meet Satsuki, right?" Miharu confirmed slowly.

"Yes. You would want to confirm each other's safety with your own eyes first, right?" Rio asked.

"Yes," Miharu nodded firmly in response.

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“That would be the purpose of temporarily sneaking her out for a secret meeting. There’d be a fairly high risk in that alone, so it’s not an option that could be repeated often, but for a one time event there should be plenty of ways to make it happen,” Rio explained.

“If we wanted to keep seeing her we’d have to head to the castle ourselves, is what you mean?”

“If Satsuki is in a position where she can’t walk outside freely, that may be the only choice. Even if she could go out, someone would be keeping an eye on her friendships, so your existence would be revealed to the kingdom for sure,” Rio agreed with Miharu’s question with a contemplative look. What was more important was whether Miharu actually wanted to meet with Satsuki regardless of that.

“Then if — if the kingdom finds out about us, can we still remain with you even in that situation?” Miharu asked with an extremely worried face.

Rio hesitated slightly for a moment, before averting his eyes from the guilty-looking Miharu and answering. “I… wonder. If your existence were a weak point for Satsuki, I believe the kingdom would try to secure you and the siblings. Of course, that would depend on how much influence Satsuki has over the kingdom…”

There was a need to investigate in advance how the kingdom would treat Miharu, Aki, and Masato if they found out about them. Rio figured he’d be able to find out some of the specifics by contacting Satsuki on the night of the banquet. However, ultimately there was no way of knowing exactly what would happen until the moment unfurled.

At the very least, Rio currently had Liselotte of the Galarc Kingdom as a connection, which meant that relying on her assistance could be another option.

“Oh, right,” Miharu nodded, her shoulders slumping in disappointment.

“…However, if the three of you plan on returning to Japan

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one day, it would be ideal if you were to meet up with Takahisa as well. There's no need to rush, but there's no need to hold back from seeking assistance either, so please discuss it with Aki and Masato. Like I said earlier, you guys should be the ones to make the decision," Rio said and smiled rather awkwardly.

Us... returning to Japan...

It was why the three were being protected by Rio. It was what they had discussed when they'd first arrived in this world and spoken to Rio.

However, the moment Miharu heard those words from Rio's mouth once more, an indescribable sense of anxiety and panic rose within her, making her shrink in on herself. If Haruto was in fact the Haruto she'd once known, then would he have advised that they return to Japan? The thought overwhelmed her.

"U-Umm!" Before she knew it, Miharu's mouth was moving.

"Yes?" Seeing the normally docile Miharu suddenly raise her voice in a rough manner made Rio's eyes round in response.

"Do you — do you ever think about returning to Japan yourself, Haruto?" Miharu asked, looking extremely frustrated. She had avoided touching upon this delicate topic until now, but she simply had to know.

Rio hesitated for a moment before answering with a small sigh. "...That would be impossible." He did not clearly specify whether he wanted to return or not.

"Why is that?" Miharu asked in a daze.

"Even if I were to return, the person I was in my previous life is already dead. If I were to return to Japan now, I would have no place to go. I wouldn't even be on any kind of official record, you know?" Hints of a self-deprecating smile could be seen on Rio's face as he answered with much difficulty.

"...But, don't you have... I don't know, regrets, or things

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you wished you had done?” Miharu asked. It was an intrusive question that was rare coming from her.

“…I wonder,” Rio replied, avoiding answering.

“Then, the Haruto of your previous life is…” Miharu tried to ask something, stumbling over her words, but Latifa’s voice suddenly echoed.

“Onii-chan?”

“What’s wrong, Latifa?” Rio said, looking in the direction the voice came from. At some point, the door to the house had opened, revealing Latifa standing there.

“Oh, it’s just that Onii-chan wasn’t there when I woke up, so…” Latifa said hesitantly.

“I see. Sorry, I was talking with Miharu,” Rio informed her, a gentle smile pasted on his face.

Latifa shook her head and approached Rio. “It’s okay. Are you done talking?”

“…Are we?” Rio asked Miharu.

“Ah, umm… Yes.” Miharu looked like she wanted to say something, but agreed indecisively instead.

“Then, I’m going for a short walk. I’d like to greet our neighbors now that I’ve returned, too. Orphia and the others seem to be making lunch, so I’ll be back soon. What would you like to do, Latifa?” Rio asked Latifa, distancing himself from Miharu.

Latifa paused for a moment, but slowly shook her head in the end. “…I’ll pass, it’s fine.”

“I see… Then I’ll be right back. Thanks, Latifa,” Rio said as he departed, patting Latifa on the shoulders.

“Yup, see you soon.” Latifa trembled with a flinch, nodding awkwardly as she saw Rio off.

So he noticed after all…

Latifa had been listening to Rio and Miharu’s conversation from the doorway from the middle of their talk — the reason why he thanked her was because of that. Latifa herself hadn’t even realized she’d timed her interruption as

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such, and felt an indescribable discomfort over that.

"...See you later, Haruto." Miharu still looked like she wanted to say something, but swallowed her words as she saw Rio off.

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After Rio left, Latifa and Miharu were left alone by the doorway.

Miharu suddenly opened her mouth. "...Say, Latifa."

"Hm? Yeah?" Latifa replied awkwardly.

"Umm, do you..." While Miharu had been the one to start talking, she seemed extremely unsure of her words. Her inner conflict was quite visible. "Latifa, how much do you know about Haruto?" she asked fearfully.

At present, the only ones who knew that Rio had memories of a previous life were the council of elders and Dryas herself. Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa had been showing Miharu around, so they weren't present and didn't know. Rio told Miharu that himself, so Miharu had avoided talking about Rio's previous life in front of the spirit folk girls until now.

However...

Miharu had a suspicion that Rio's adopted sister might know about his past life.

"...What do you mean, how much?" Latifa asked hesitantly.

"I was just wondering if you knew why he uses the alias 'Haruto,' or something like that, maybe." Miharu avoided Latifa's eyes and spoke falteringly.

Latifa paused for a long moment before cutting to the point that Miharu had been trying to describe long-windedly. "...Are you perhaps asking about Onii-chan's previous life?"

"S-So you do know about it after all." Miharu's expression

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suddenly changed, and she bit her lip.

“Yup, Onii-chan told me as proof of our sibling bond,” Latifa nodded.

“Then… Then… do you know, Latifa? If Haruto’s — Haruto’s alias… Was that his name in his previous life?” Miharu asked in earnest.

“…I can’t tell you that. Onii-chan asked me not to tell anyone anything about his previous life.” Latifa shook her head slowly.

“He said that…”

Miharu wondered what exactly that could mean. It wasn’t something one would to want spread normally. She didn’t know why he didn’t want it spread, but she couldn’t accept it was just because of a matter of privacy.

That being said, she couldn’t force Latifa to tell her, so Miharu simply clenched her hands into fists.

“Even if you can’t ask me, why don’t you just ask Onii-chan yourself?” Latifa suggested with a very troubled look.

“…It might just be my imagination, but it feels like he’s avoiding me. Especially ever since he came back this time,” Miharu said, frowning sadly.

I kinda thought the same thing. But I also thought it was just my imagination…

Rio really did seem like he was avoiding Miharu earlier, Latifa thought. She first noticed something was odd during the exchange between Rio returning to the village and before they entered the town hall together. It was as though Rio was purposefully avoiding Miharu’s eyes…

But even if that were true, then Miharu was behaving strangely, too. Ever since Rio returned, her eyes and attention had continuously been focused on him.

“…Why do you want to know about Onii-chan’s past life?” Latifa asked, examining Miharu’s expression.

“If I answer that, will you tell me Haruto’s name in his previous life?” Miharu seemed extremely frustrated as she

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brought up a way for them to swap information.

"I can't do that." Latifa shook her head slowly.

"...Sorry, that was unfair of me to say. I'm sorry," Miharu apologized shamefully. It was behavior she would have never shown under normal circumstances, so she must have felt exceptionally defeated.

"No, it's okay..." Latifa said with a contemplative look, searching Miharu's face for her feelings.

Maybe... no, it's more likely that Miharu...

Based on their exchange up until now, Latifa was practically certain that Miharu suspected Rio was Amakawa Haruto in his previous life.

But... from when?

When had she realized it? Because their names were the same? If that was the only factor, she would have taken some kind of action long ago. There must have been some other factor, Latifa thought.

Ah, was it then...? Latifa suddenly thought of something and understood.

It was back when they had made the apple cake during cooking class — they were talking about the first time Rio and Latifa came to the village. As they described how Rio was thrown into a jail cell, Orphia and Alma said they had heard Rio mutter 'Mii-chan' in his sleep.

Back then, Latifa noticed that Miharu's expression had clearly changed. She hadn't acted strangely after that, but it was possible that she'd started holding onto her suspicions then. Then, after actually seeing Rio again, that doubt grew stronger.

Has Onii-chan noticed Miharu's change in behavior? Is that why he's avoiding her? Latifa suspected.

"Latifa?" Miharu tilted her head awkwardly, peering at Latifa's face. Latifa had been lost in her own thoughts, so Miharu was most likely wondering what was going on with her.

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Latifa thought hard for a moment before slowly moving her mouth. “…Say, Miharu.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you about Onii-chan’s previous life. But I can tell you about my past life,” Latifa stated, having made up her mind.

“Eh…?” Miharu was dumbfounded. For a moment, she didn’t understand what Latifa had said, as she had no idea that Latifa had a past life.

“I have a past life too. A story I’ve only told Onii-chan. But I’ll tell it to you too, because it’s you. My conditions are that you stay silent about what I say, and that you answer one of my questions after I’m done,” Latifa said with determination and looked directly at Miharu.

“Latifa…” Miharu was baffled by the sudden topic at hand.

“Well? Do you accept these terms? Though it isn’t fair to just say that when you know nothing about my past life, so I’ll tell you one thing up front. I knew Onii-chan in my past life. We died in the same traffic accident.”

“Ah…” Miharu gasped in shock.

“I might change my mind later, so I’m only going to wait ten seconds. Ten, nine, eight…”

“W-Wait! I want to hear it. Please tell me, Latifa. I promise to abide by your conditions.”

“Got it. Sorry, this time I was the one saying unfair things. But in exchange, I’ll tell you about my past life. I don’t think you’ll regret it,” Latifa said apologetically.

She wanted to know Miharu’s feelings. Just like how Miharu wanted to know about Rio’s past life, Latifa wanted to know why Miharu was digging into Rio’s past life.

Miharu shook her head politely, “It’s okay. I don’t want to be pushy, but will you tell me right away?”

“Yup. I was an elementary school student in my past life. Onii-chan was a university student, and we knew each other because we took the same bus to our schools.”

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"…" Miharu was focused on listening, so she didn't say a word.

"At first, I wasn't used to riding the bus. I only used it occasionally on rainy days, but I once missed my stop and went somewhere I was unfamiliar with. When I got scared and started crying, Onii-chan brought me back home. That was my first meeting with Onii-chan. That was all it took for me to… No, the Onii-chan of my past life was so kind and handsome, I fell in love with him at first sight. Then I made mom let me take the bus to school. And that was one year before we died…"

Latifa paused there before continuing, fondly remembering the details.

"But in the end, even with one year's worth of time, I never gained the courage to talk to Onii-chan ever again. Ah, I know I asked why you couldn't talk to Onii-chan yourself before, but now that I think about it, I'm really not one to talk about Miharu, huh? I still have lots of things I haven't had the courage to say, even now." Latifa smiled sadly.

"Latifa…" Miharu clenched her fists tightly from the heartache.

"That's why I wasn't actually that close to Onii-chan in my previous life. Of course, since becoming the me of this world, I've heard lots of stories from Onii-chan, but I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone about that. Sorry — I couldn't tell you much, I guess?" Latifa apologized regretfully. Perhaps she had just wanted to tell someone about herself. Maybe she wanted Miharu to know about her — it was, perhaps, why she brought up such a topic.

"That's not true." Miharu smiled fleetingly, shaking her head.

"Thank you. Then, to finish things off, I'll tell you a little about what kind of person Onii-chan looked like to my previous self. And to my current self too…" After saying that, a certain intention could be glimpsed in Latifa's eyes. It was

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possible that talking about her impression of Haruto from when she was Suzune would be a violation of the promise she made Rio. At the very least, it was definitely a grey area.

But Latifa wanted to say it anyway. She had to say it, she thought. If she was to remain in love with Rio in the future, she thought she had to face Miharu directly right here and now. “Onii-chan always… The Onii-chan in my memory always had a sad look on his face. He had a faraway look in his eyes, as though he was watching someone who wasn’t there. Like someone very important was gone, and he knew they wouldn’t be returning…”

Latifa knew who that important person was. She was already treading on a dangerous line at this point, so she couldn’t say any further than that.

“Haruto was…” Miharu blinked.

“I don’t know… I don’t know if Onii-chan is still looking at that person even now. But, you know. I love Onii-chan. He saved me in this world as well.”

“R-Really?” Latifa’s sudden confession had Miharu recoiling her head.

“Yup. Come to think of it, I’ve never told you about what happened… About the life I was living before I came to the village…”

“I heard you were traveling with Haruto…” Miharu said nervously.

“It was before that. I-I was… I was a slave before. By the time I regained my memories of my past life in this world, I had been born and raised as a slave.”

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“Ah…” Miharu was rendered speechless at Latifa’s confession.

“The Strahl region is human territory, so there are practically no communities like this village where people of different races live together. If there are, they’re slaves. There’s no place for us other than slavery.” Latifa continued on with a troubled look. “The nobles that owned me raised me as an assassin. They put a magic collar on me, to keep me from disobeying. That’s why, when I regained my memories of my past life, I had already killed people. After my memories awakened too, with these hands, I…”

Latifa’s body trembled a bit as she looked down at her hands. It must have been painful just to recall. It was a past she normally kept sealed deep within her memories.

“It’s okay, Latifa. If it hurts, you don’t have to force yourself to tell me.” Miharu approached Latifa and grabbed her hand. She spoke with a pained look in her eyes.

Latifa shook her head from side to side. “No, I need to do this… In order to ask you a question later. That’s why… You may not want to hear this, but I want you to. Is that okay?”

“…Yup.” Miharu frowned, nodding deeply.

“Thank you. As an assassin, I… I was controlled by the slavery collar, and told to kill Onii-chan like the others… That was what happened between me and Onii-chan, before we came to the village,” Latifa said shamefully, biting her lip as she stared at Miharu.

“…Latifa.” Tears gently fell from Miharu’s eyes. The story was just too much to bear.

“I pretended to collapse so that I could kill Onii-chan. But, there was no way I could win against Onii-chan, and I easily had the tables turned on me. I thought I would be killed, but I didn’t want to die, became scared, then completely threw a crying fit, at which Onii-chan knocked me out…” Latifa said bitterly. It really was a miserable recollection.

“Onii-chan didn’t kill me, though. Instead, he removed

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the collar that was controlling me. Then he brought me, who didn't have a place in Strahl, who was nothing more than a burden, all the way to this village. He gave someone like me, who didn't even have their own will, a chance to live an ordinary life," Latifa continued in a quiet but firm voice.

"..." Miharu was overwhelmed and stood there in silence.

"I've caused Onii-chan a lot of trouble. I owe him so much, more than I can repay him in this lifetime. Onii-chan's kind, so he'd deny all that, but that's not true at all. That's why I'll spend my life returning this debt to Onii-chan. That's what I think..." Latifa said, then paused.

"...You really love Haruto, after all," Miharu said softly. It was clear as day that Latifa really loved Rio from their conversation just now. So clear, it was almost too bright to look at directly.

"Yup, that's right. I love Onii-chan. I love him as my brother, and as a man. I fell in love with the same person twice." Latifa nodded.

"I-I see..." For some reason, Miharu felt her chest clenching and made a pained face.

"That's why, I think I get it. The reason why Sara and Orphia and Alma, why everyone loves him too... They still seem to feel guilty for how horribly they treated him over the misunderstanding when we first wandered into the village, but I can tell they love him."

"...Right," Miharu nodded with difficulty. Since they had been living together like a family, Miharu had somewhat realized that too.

"What about you, Miharu?" Latifa suddenly asked.

"...Huh?" For a moment, Miharu wasn't sure what she was asking, her eyes widening. But she understood her meaning in no time and flinched in shock.

"Do you love Onii-chan too, Miharu? This is the condition I gave at the beginning. The question I wanted to ask you," Latifa asked bluntly, staring at Miharu up close.

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“Uh…” Miharu was unable to answer on the spot, a terribly hesitant look on her face.

“You don’t have to rush. I want to hear your true feelings,” Latifa said calmly.

“I… I had someone I loved when I was little.” Miharu slowly opened her mouth, thinking hard. “I probably loved that person just as much as you are currently in love. It was natural for the two of us to be together every day, and I thought it would only be natural for us to be together forever… Me, and my childhood friend. Aki was also there, and the three of us would play together,” she continued.

“Mhm…” Latifa nodded, urging Miharu to go on.

“But our time together didn’t continue on for very long. When I was seven, that boy had to move far away with his father, after his parents divorced. Only Aki and I were left. Aki was that boy’s little sister, you know. She’s grown to hate him now, but back then, she loved her brother. After her brother left her, she shut herself away in her room for days and cried,” Miharu said slowly, looking back on those times.

Latifa’s eyes had widened when she found out Aki hated Haruto, but she chose not to touch upon that and instead asked nervously about Miharu at the time. “…Did you cry, Miharu?”

“I was three years older than Aki. I say that to make myself sound cooler, but I cried too. I cried the whole day he moved,” Miharu answered with a bitter smile. “But, when we parted, he made a promise to me. That when he grew up, he’d come to get me. That’s why we should get married. Then we could always be together, he could always be by my side, and protect me with his life…” she said with a sad, faraway look.

“Miharu…” Latifa felt like her chest was about to rip apart. In the end, Haruto was still able to keep that promise, even now. He would protect Miharu with his life.

“I’m a simple person, so I was really happy and stopped

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crying because of that. I don't know if I still love that person now that I've grown up, but my memories of that time are a precious treasure to me. That's why... That's why... I couldn't imagine having that kind of relationship with another man until now. But..." Miharu said in embarrassment, frowning at the end.

"But?" Latifa gulped.

"...I don't know. Something like this, I've never... While living with Haruto, I started overlapping his existence with the person I knew. I know that it's the wrong thing to do — I keep telling myself that — but lately my feelings keep surging up. The timelines don't match, though, so it couldn't be possible."

Around and around, in circles. Miharu's thoughts and feelings were sucked into a cycle of negativity. Her face twisted in pain as she ducked her head, but after a while, she raised it again.

"The person I loved when I was young was named Amakawa Haruto. The same name as Haruto." She stared at Latifa as she spoke quietly, as though seeking an answer.

"...Sorry. I know what it is you're trying to ask. Even so, I can't tell you anything about Onii-chan's past life from my own mouth." That was what she had promised, after all. Latifa shook her head apologetically.

"Yeah. I'm sorry too, for troubling you like this... The reason I haven't asked Haruto myself is probably because I still haven't reached my own answer yet. I'm too scared to make sure..." Miharu bit her lip out of shame.

"...That's understandable. You're an older sister to two, so you have to consider Aki and Masato."

In reality, Miharu was in a position as the eldest where she always had to consider the other two, not just herself. However, the point that ultimately made Miharu hold her ground was the mismatched timelines. There was no way Amakawa Haruto could have been a university student,

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since he was a first year high schooler like her. That's why, logically speaking, there was no way they could be the same person.

That was the binding spell. Because she understood there was a time discrepancy, Miharu was unconsciously afraid of confirming with Rio. She believed it wasn't something she should confirm, having the vague feeling something would change if she did.

"...Yeah. I have to keep it together. For the sake of those two," Miharu said to herself.

While it could be interpreted as a way of avoiding the problem with Rio, it was also true that she had to face the issue with Satsuki head-on too. If anything, in terms of urgency this was more important. After all, meeting Satsuki wasn't just something that concerned Miharu; it would affect Aki and Masato greatly in the future too. Rio had prepared such an opportunity for them, so they couldn't let that go to waste.

It was their own matter. They couldn't just leave it to other people, and they couldn't shove it all at Rio either. Miharu calmed down a little, forcing her miserable feelings into her chest.

"When I'm watching you, I think to myself that I have to try harder too. Thank you — for listening to my story, and for answering my question." Latifa's mouth relaxed into a smile as she thanked Miharu, glad that she had been able to have a frank conversation.

I don't think this current state can continue, either, Latifa thought from deep inside her heart, though she couldn't explain it logically. Now that she knew Miharu's feelings were inclined towards Rio, she knew the problem between Rio and Miharu had to be solved before she could proudly face Rio herself. She couldn't give Rio her all before that.

"Umm, is that all you wanted to ask of me?" Miharu asked nervously.

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Latifa glanced at the entrance and smiled sadly. “Yup. I know what your feelings are now. Like I said at the beginning, you can’t tell anyone about what I told you, okay? Especially not Onii-chan.”

“Yup, I promise,” Miharu agreed, returning the smile gently.

“Let’s go, then,” Latifa said in a slightly louder voice, turning towards the door. It creaked slightly, moving faintly as though a wind had blown. On the other side was —

…Miharu. Is that true?

It was Aki. She had been searching for Miharu to discuss things with her when she found the two of them conversing outside the house and ended up eavesdropping. Aki ran into the house to avoid being caught.

“What’s the matter, Aki?” Upon running into the living room, Aki encountered Sara, whose eyes widened slightly.

“Ah, no, I was just walking a little, thinking it might help process my thoughts, or something…” Aki said, making up an excuse on the spot.

“Oh, I know that feeling. Sitting still doesn’t suit me either,” Sara agreed with a giggle. Just then, Miharu and Latifa came back inside.

“We’re back!” The moment Latifa entered the living room, she greeted Aki energetically.

“Welcome back. Wait, where did you go? What about Rio?”

“We were talking just outside of the house. Onii-chan went for a short walk outside. He said he was going to say hi to the neighbors. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.” Latifa answered Sara’s question in her usual tone.

“I see. Let’s have lunch as soon as Rio’s back, then. All the preparations are done.”

Latifa’s nose twitched as she sniffed, then she smiled with a giggle. “Yup! You made all kinds of food today. It smells great. The smell reached all the way outside the house, so

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I'm starving."

"It… smelled? I could only tell once we got inside…" Miharu's eyes widened in wonder.

"That's because I'm a werefox! I'm super sensitive to smell." Latifa puffed her chest up proudly.

"I see." Miharu giggled in amusement. Latifa looked at Aki, who was standing still somewhat awkwardly, and called out to her gently in worry.

"Aki, are you okay? You don't look too well…"

"N-No, I'm fine. There's nothing wrong at all." Aki shook her head awkwardly, her voice high-pitched.

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Shortly after that, Rio returned, and it was soon time for lunch. The dining table was packed with the feast that Orphia, Sara, and Alma had prepared, but the atmosphere in the room was a bit awkward. There were conversations happening, but it wasn't as lively as it usually was.

Aki, Masato, and Miharu in particular had stiff expressions on their faces. The reason being, of course, was what Rio had outlined upon his return. Even the normally-boisterous Masato was thinking seriously about what their plan of action needed to be.

"By the way, Rio," Orphia suddenly said.

"Yes?" Rio replied immediately, looking at her.

"What kind of person is the noble that's bringing you to the banquet?"

While they may not be directly involved, it was still a person that Miharu and the others would be relying on. She figured it wouldn't hurt to learn more about what kind of person they were.

With that, everyone's attention gathered on Rio.

"Let's see… As I said to the head elders before, she's intelligent with a strong sense of duty. She was placed in

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charge of the city at a young age, and also operates a huge organization that she established herself. I believe no one is more befitting of being called ‘talented’ than her,” Rio explained.

“She’s a woman? I had assumed it would be a man…” Orphia blinked in surprise. The others also seemed to have the preconceived notion that the noble was a man, so they were all slightly taken aback.

“Yes, I believe she’s around Orphia’s age,” Rio confirmed calmly.

“The same as me?” Orphia murmured in awe.

“Haruto, is that person possibly Amande’s…” Miharu suddenly said. It seemed like she had someone in mind.

“Yes. She’s the governor of Amande and the president of the Ricca Guild too,” Rio confirmed.

“Huh? Wasn’t the Ricca Guild the place that sold the underwe… the swimsuits that we were trying to reproduce?” Orphia nearly said underwear, but corrected herself to swimsuit. The village was currently manufacturing experimental modern underwear and swimsuits based on what Miharu and the others brought to the village. Since there was an overwhelming number of opportunities to use underwear, Orphia had said underwear by reflex, but she apparently thought that word was a little embarrassing to say in front of Rio.

“Yup. Amande was a nearby city back when we lived in the Strahl region…” Miharu nodded, thinking hard. She knew that the Ricca Guild sold a lot of items that resembled modern Japanese products, so it was possible that the president, Liselotte, could also have been reincarnated like Rio…

Which meant Rio might have shared information about his previous life with Liselotte.

“You said that you saved Liselotte during some predicament, but what happened?” Alma asked out of

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curiosity.

“It’s a long story, but to summarize: there was a large-scale monster attack on Amande, and I cooperated with the extermination efforts,” Rio answered broadly.

“Did everything work out okay?” Miharu asked worriedly. She had never imagined such a thing would occur after they left Amande.

“Yes. I wouldn’t be here otherwise. Just to be safe, I had Aishia wait in a location away from Amande,” Rio replied with a smile.

“We don’t get monsters in this village, so it’s a little hard to imagine, but if Rio says it was large scale then there must have been an exceptional number of them,” Alma muttered.

Monsters seemed to live in areas close to human civilization, so there were barely any that took up residence in the Wilderness. Instead, all kinds of savage creatures ran rampant. She knew well how they could be threatening when they ganged up.

In the meantime, Sara’s interest as a warrior was piqued. “Could you tell us what battling monsters was like, if you don’t mind?”

Perhaps it was also because they were gathered for a meal where they were more taciturn than normal that she thought it was a good topic to go with.

Latifa raised her hand. “Ah! I want to hear about the circumstances under which Onii-chan and his teacher Celia lived together instead!” It was something that had bothered her ever since Rio returned to the village and casually mentioned they were cohabiting. Now that everyone was gathered together, she figured this was the perfect time to ask.

“Geez, Latifa, don’t interrupt other people while they’re speaking… Wait, living together! You’re right! Was it true you were living together?!” Sara tried to object to Latifa in exasperation when the topic of Rio cohabitating with Celia

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came up and she flipped sides instantly, her expression changing.

“Y-Yes. This is also a long story, but…” Rio was a little surprised, but he replied with a wince.

“How curious indeed, Sara,” Alma said with a giggle.

“Ah, no, that’s not…” As Sara had shown an excessive reaction already, she mumbled her words while blushing deeply. Orphia giggled as she watched Sara act in such a way.

“Hey hey, is she your local mistress, Onii-chan?” Latifa suddenly asked.

At that, the spirit folk looked surprised and coughed.

“…She’s not. Where did you learn such a word?” Rio must have felt a headache coming on, as he was pressing his head with his hand lightly.

“From Dominic,” Latifa revealed honestly.

“Got it. I’ll have a word with him the next time I see him,” Rio said with a sigh. He figured there was a need to emphasize not teaching Latifa strange things like that…

“Good grief, that old man… I shall scold him too. I’m sorry about him.” Alma felt ashamed of her own family and apologized to Rio with a dejected slump in her shoulders.

“Say, Onii-chan. How did you end up living together? She’s a noble lady, isn’t she?” Latifa was still curious and pouted her lips as she pressed Rio to talk. Sara and the other girls also seemed interested, staring at Rio closely.

“All right, I’ll tell you,” Rio nodded with a strained smile, explaining the series of events that led to Celia’s rescue.

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Later that night, Miharu called Aki and Masato to her room. The three of them sat in chairs around a small table.

“Have the two of you settled on your thoughts about the situation?” Miharu asked, immediately getting straight to

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business.

"…Yup," Aki nodded.

"I'm still in the middle of thinking, but I want to hear your opinions too," Masato said, scratching his head roughly.

"I see. Then let's talk about it. Aki, could you start by telling us your thoughts?" Miharu asked.

"I… I want to return to Strahl. If there's a chance that my brother is there and there's a possibility that I can meet him… Then I want to attend the banquet," Aki said seriously.

Miharu nodded. "I see… Then what about you, Masato?"

"The main issue stopping me is the possibility that we won't be able to return here. Being with Haruto might mean he can teach me swordcraft, but… My first goal was to win once against Arslan…" Masato said, pondering to himself. "But we have to meet with Satsuki and my bro at some point, I guess. Well, it doesn't feel great knowing we'll be a burden, but I do want to go see them," he added.

"Will we really be unable to return to this village? With my brother and Satsuki," Aki muttered.

"Didn't they say that the king wouldn't approve of that? At the very least, Satsuki's affiliated with the Galarc Kingdom now," Masato repeated Rio's words from earlier, stating the predicted outcome.

"But we don't know how my brother and Satsuki feel about that."

"That may be true, but isn't that why we have to meet them to find out? Bro and Satsuki could have made close friends within the kingdom already, you know?" Whether they could or could not leave the kingdom aside, there was a possibility that they didn't want to leave.

"That's why I'm saying we should go see them and ask them directly. We also have to talk about whether we can return to Earth or not. That's our problem, right?" Rather than have Rio act as an agent, there were things that could only be conveyed by the people involved.

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“Mmgh, I see… But even supposing that Bro and Satsuki wanted to come to this village, and that we can return here too, are we even allowed to bring them along? Isn’t this place meant to be a secret? We made a promise.”

“That would… require consulting Rio and the elders…” Aki trailed off towards the end. She seemed to feel as though they had caused enough trouble for Rio and the village, so she had an uncomfortable look on her face.

Masato raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and looked to Miharu. “Mm… it’s no good. I still have no idea what to do at all. What do you think, Miharu?”

Aki’s gaze followed him to Miharu too. Miharu had been listening to the two of them talk in contemplative silence the entire time. “…I can understand both of your concerns. On top of all that, I want to follow Haruto.”

“Me too!” Aki chimed in.

“Wait, Aki. Let me continue.”

“O-Okay…” Aki was taken aback and nodded uncomfortably.

“Like Aki said, this is our problem. That’s why it isn’t something we should leave completely up to Haruto… It would be preferable to meet up directly and discuss things. Isn’t that right?”

“…Yeah,” Aki agreed fearfully.

“But, like Masato said, we’d most likely be burdens and get in the way. That’s why… This isn’t exactly a compromise, but I’m thinking I should represent the two of you and attend the night banquet with Haruto,” Miharu said.

“Then what about us…?” Aki asked worriedly.

“You’d stay back here at the village. If you insist, we can ask if you can come along to Strahl, but I’ll be the only one to attend the night banquet. I want you to wait with Ai-chan somewhere safe near the castle,” Miharu said, peering at Aki’s face.

“But that’s… That means that even if Masato and I follow

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you to Strahl, there's a chance we won't get to see Satsuki at all, doesn't it?" Aki asked, looking terribly frustrated.

"...Yeah. Haruto said he would try bringing Satsuki out of the castle if possible, but that doesn't guarantee that he will, just that the possibility is there. Of course, I'll try discussing it with Satsuki too to see if we can get the two of you inside the castle, but that's not guaranteed either," Miharu explained to Aki honestly. "Do you still want to go to Strahl regardless of that, Aki?"

"Uh..." Aki was unable to respond straight away, a tearful expression on her face.

"What about you, Masato?" Miharu continued.

"I..." Masato hesitated with a sour expression.

"We don't know what kind of position we'll be placed in at the castle, so having the three of us present would be an even greater burden on Haruto, don't you think? That's why I want you to let me talk to Satsuki alone first." That way, even if Miharu became unable to move in the castle, Aki and Masato could return to the village.

"...Miharu, you..." Aki suddenly raised her head, trying to say something with a look of deep thought.

"What is it, Aki?" Miharu looked back at Aki, listening in earnest.

"Miharu, you... Haruto..."

Do you like Haruto? Is it because you've overlapped Haruto with that man so much? Is that why you want to be beside Haruto?

That's what Aki wanted to ask, but the words got stuck in her throat and her mouth wouldn't move. Instead, a very sulky expression fell across her face and she pouted with tears in her eyes.

"...Say, Aki. I know you might find it hard to rely on me, but I'm your big sister too. We're not related by blood, but I've grown up with you this whole time, so I believe we are. That's why... If you think of me in the same way, could you

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leave this to me just this once?” Miharu asked with a troubled face. Aki bit her lip in frustration and suddenly stood up.

“…All right.” She hugged Miharu, burying her face into Miharu’s chest.

“Thanks, Aki. I’m sorry.” Miharu smiled gently and patted Aki’s back to comfort her.

“It’s okay. But I still want to go to Strahl. Even if I can’t see Satsuki or my brother this time, I want to be beside you.” Aki shook her head and tightened her hold around Miharu.

“Aki…” Naturally, Miharu hugged Aki back tighter too.

“…Umm, are the two of you forgetting me?” Masato seemed to feel uncomfortable at being forced to watch the display of their sisterly love, as he reinforced his presence with embarrassment.

“What? You were here?” Aki said to Masato, her eyes slightly puffy with tears.

“Uh, yeah, I was. From the very beginning,” Masato stressed.

“Hmm… So? What, do you want to be hugged by Miharu too? Gross. What a pervert.” Aki shot Masato an unamused look, trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Wha— No, that’s not it! I wasn’t thinking anything about how jealous I was or how soft they must be!” Masato denied with a red face.

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“You’re just digging your own grave…” Despite Aki’s exasperation, she couldn’t hold back her giggles.

“S-Shut up!” Masato yelled in a fluster.

“Well, whatever. What will you do, then? Do you want to stay at the village and continue your sword training?” Aki asked Masato, trying to recover their derailed conversation.

Masato scratched his head shyly. “Ah, well. If it’s come to this, I’ll have to bow my head to Haruto too. I want to go to Strahl as well.”

“Hmm, so you’re coming after all. You didn’t seem that enthusiastic about it…” Aki stared closely at Masato’s face.

“Shut up. I changed my mind.” Masato turned away.

“Oh, really.” A smile tugged at Aki’s lips.

“Fufu.” Miharu watched the two of them with an amused smile on her face. They finally felt like their usual selves again. But with that decided, they had to make haste.

“First, let’s all go to Haruto. Then we’ll call Sara and the girls over and give our report together,” Miharu suggested.

“Yup.”

“Okay.”

Aki and Masato nodded in unison.

With that decided, the three of them visited Rio’s room and knocked on the door, with Rio’s reply coming immediately. “Come in.”

“Wait, Latifa?!” It seemed there was something of a commotion inside.

“Excuse me…” Miharu opened the door fearfully. Rio was carrying Latifa on his back — or rather, Latifa was clinging to Rio’s back. “Good evening, Miharu.”

“Umm, good evening, Haruto. Do you have a moment right now?” Seeing Rio carrying Latifa on his back made Miharu hesitate.

Rio smiled faintly “Yes, we were just messing around. If the three of you are here together, it means you’ve come to a decision, right?”

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“Yes,” Miharu said.

“Ahaha, you’re so attached to Haruto, Latifa.” When Aki spotted Latifa clinging to Rio’s back, she couldn’t help but give a slightly strained smile at the display of affection between the two.

“Yup!” Latifa nodded with a carefree smile.

“For now, please come inside. Latifa, can you go to the living room or back to your own room?”

“Eeh, but I wanna hear too.” Latifa pouted.

“It’s an important conversation. You understand that, right?” Rio warned her with a troubled look. At that, Latifa puffed up her cheeks and climbed off his back, obediently moving to leave the room.

“Umm, Latifa can stay,” Miharu said. “Actually, we were thinking of calling Sara and the others over too, so that we could all talk together. About our thoughts.”

“With me too?” Latifa cocked her head hesitantly.

“Yup. I want you to listen too,” Miharu said, smiling gently.

“I understand. Let’s talk in the living room, then.” Rio respected their decision and suggested they relocate.

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Sara, Orphia, and Alma were called to Rio’s living room. Once everyone had gathered and taken their seats on the sofa, Rio spoke up.

“Now, could you tell us what the three of you have decided to do?”

Miharu took a deep breath. “Yes. Firstly, the three of us have reached the conclusion that we all want to go to Strahl.”

“I understand. If that’s first, then is there more?” Rio asked.

That request was well within his expectations. There was nothing to be surprised about. Neither Latifa nor the spirit

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folk girls seemed particularly shocked, either. However —

"I would… I would like to attend the night banquet with you." Latifa and the spirit folk girls twitched in reaction.

"…If the kingdom finds out about you, the royalty and nobility may try to find a way to use you. I'm sure they will treat you politely on the surface, but that would mean revealing your name and face to the public from here onwards. It's possible that people who will try to use that for their own plots may appear. You are aware of all this, yet still want to attend the banquet. Is that correct?" Miharu's request to attend the banquet too had been a little unexpected, making Rio pause for a moment before confirming her intentions.

"…Yes," Miharu nodded deeply, conveying her own determination. Even if she couldn't attend the banquet, if she made herself available to meet Satsuki at any moment, she would be well-known at some point. It was just a matter of whether it was sooner or later.

But more than anything, Miharu hated leaving everything to Rio alone. While leaving everything to Rio might certainly be a wise choice, it also felt like Rio would go somewhere far away, which made her feel quite scared. This choice was Miharu's own selfish desire — it was her chance to take her future into her own hands. Now, whether Rio would accept her selfishness or not was another thing.

Miharu watched Rio's face closely, feeling a little scared.

"…Then, let me confirm one more thing. If this is for you, then what about Aki and Masato?" Rio asked, looking at them.

Miharu wrung out all her courage to answer Rio's question. "I was hoping they could wait near the castle."

"…Depending on how our discussion goes, it's possible that Aki and Masato won't be able to meet Satsuki even if they go to Strahl. You might be going for no reason, you realize?" Rio asked.

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“Yes, we have taken that into account. After the three of us talked, I made this request of them. This is what we decided,” Miharu said resolutely.

“I see…” Rio gave a small sigh and looked at Aki and Masato once more. The two of them nodded and returned his gaze. They didn’t look like they had anything further to say; Rio could tell that they had truly accepted this.

Meanwhile, the spirit folk girls were all watching them silently.

“Is that okay, Haruto? Or is taking the three of us too difficult…” Masato asked fearfully and bowed his head toward Rio. Though Rio could use spirit arts to fly, there was no way he could carry Miharu, Aki, and Masato together while doing so.

“I have to make sure I fly safely, of course, but that doesn’t mean its impossible,” Rio replied to Masato with a wry smile. On the other hand, Sara, Orphia, and Alma all exchanged secret glances.

“Then…” Masato and Aki gulped, awaiting Rio’s conclusion.

“If that is the answer the three of you have arrived at after careful consideration, then we shall proceed with that.” Rio smiled gently. If this decision of theirs had been made lightly, he would have given them more warning, but he could tell that wasn’t the case.

“Yay!” Masato and Aki said together, high-fiving each other.

“That’s great.” Sara smiled with the other girls, watching Masato and Aki.

“…Are you sure?” Miharu had been expecting more resistance, so when everything went so smoothly, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes. You are the one who asked, no?” Rio said with an amused look.

“Umm, but, I thought you would oppose us going to the

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castle. It'll be an inconvenience to you too, so… umm…"

"That's not true. Like I said — I'll respect your decisions. If it's to help the three of you return to Japan one day, then I'll exert every effort to help. All the more so if this is an answer you considered carefully. That's why, instead of worrying about being a nuisance or burden to me, I'd like you to push thoughts like that out of your mind," Rio said calmly to a frowning Miharu.

"…Okay." When Rio had said 'return to Japan,' Miharu couldn't help but feel vexed and saddened, her face distorting faintly. However, she immediately corrected it into a serious face and agreed slowly.

Latifa seemed to sense something, watching Miharu with a frustrated look herself.

"However, there will of course be precautions we must take in order to allow Miharu to attend the banquet, so I expect you to follow those. Is that okay?" Rio stared fixedly at Miharu, emphasizing his words.

"Y-Yes. Thank you for your consideration." Miharu nodded deeply and bowed her head to Rio.

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Chapter 5: Departure

The next morning, after Rio, Latifa, Miharu's group, and Sara's group finished breakfast, they all paid a visit to the town hall and applied for a meeting with the head elders. Shortly after, they were led to a room inside the town hall.

"Welcome. Please, take a seat," Syldora said warmly.

"Thank you very much. Miharu — you, Aki, and Masato can sit there," Rio said, urging the three of them into the seats opposite the head elders. Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma took the seats to the side.

"Excuse me." Miharu politely bowed before sitting down. Rio took the seat next to her and faced the head elders.

"You reached a conclusion faster than we expected," Ursula the werefox said.

"Yes — The three of them discussed it. Last night, Sara and the girls joined in, and I listened too. I would like to respect the decision that they made," Rio replied smoothly.

Syldora looked at the three of them and nodded. "I see. Then let us hear what you have decided at once. Lord Rio, if you please."

Rio nodded, getting straight to the point by reporting the conclusion of their conversation. "Yes. To start, the three of them want to head to Strahl."

"I see." The elders nodded solemnly. They had predicted this, but it was one of two options: remain in the village, or leave for the Strahl region. It was a matter of whether they all chose the same option or each took on a different option, but it was all within their expectations.

"In regards to what happens after moving to Strahl, Aki and Masato will wait nearby the castle. Miharu wants to

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attend the banquet with me, so I plan on consulting with the noble that has invited me to see if Miharu can attend too."

"I understand. That sounds acceptable," Syldora said in a stately manner.

Suddenly, Miharu stood up with great force. "Umm, everyone in the village has been so terribly nice to us even though our circumstances were forced upon you, and now we're leaving at our own convenience, so I'm truly sorry for everything!" Miharu must have been nervous, as her voice was high pitched as she bowed her head in deep regret.

"There's no need to be so anxious, Lady Miharu. You've finally obtained a clue towards your friend and family. There's no need to deny your feelings of wanting to meet them." Syldora gave a good-natured smile as he spoke to Miharu.

Ursula agreed cheerfully. "Indeed. It'll be a little lonely around here, but it's your future. You need to find clues on how to return to your world. There's no need to let it bother you."

Dominic raised both hands to support their decision. "Well, if you run into any danger, you can just return to the village. Like Rio, you young ones are already like our brethren too."

Ursula nodded with a smile. "That's right. If you ever feel like you're in danger, you can return to the village."

"T-Thank you very much!" Miharu bit her lip, moved by her emotions, and bowed her head deeply once more. Aki and Masato followed her, and with their thanks, bowed their heads too.

"Raise your heads, the three of you," Syldora said with a troubled look as Ursula looked at Rio.

"By the way, Lord Rio. How do you intend on getting to Strahl?"

"I plan on carrying them by air, of course," he replied. While there was a teleportation crystal to the village, there

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wasn't one back to the Strahl region, which meant the only two options were to walk or fly.

"By yourself, Lord Rio?" Ursula confirmed carefully.

"…Yes," Rio said with a little hesitation.

"Well, it's true that Lord Rio may be able to pull that off…" Ursula said, looking at Syldora and Dominic. Then, she turned to look at Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

"Uh…" They looked like they wanted to say something, but when the head elders directed their attention on them they flinched. The head elders smirked, nodding at each other with smiles at their lips.

"In that case, you should take Sara, Orphia, and Alma along," Syldora said.

"…Huh? No, but…" Rio gazed in wonder, but shook his head at the same time. He had the faint suspicion they would offer to help from the moment Ursula brought up his method of travel, but he hadn't expected this.

"It's fine. Those three probably intended as much in the first place," Ursula said, suddenly turning to Sara and the others.

"Eh… ah. Umm, yes. I never imagined it'd be so easy, and suggested by the head elders themselves…" Sara flinched and said fearfully.

"…" Rio couldn't find the words to say, frowning apologetically.

"That's that. It's decided," Dominic summarized with a smug huff.

"But what about the village's laws? The residents of the village can't wander into the outside world recklessly." Rio tried to put a stop to things through his confusion. Because of this law, neither the spirit folk girls nor Rio himself could make the final call on accompanying him.

"The law is to forbid anyone from leaving without the approval of the three head elders or the majority of the council. As for the approval of the three head elders, well,

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here you go," Ursula said with a joyful laugh.

"Uh…" Rio uttered, completely losing track of his thoughts.

It was certainly something he was grateful for — however, he felt a deep sense of regret over the fact that their harsh exceptions for their law were being disregarded for him so easily.

"Umm, it pains us to see you go through so much trouble for us, and we're already forcing Haruto to take on so much… I don't know…" Miharu said in a fluster. She felt bad leaving everything to Rio, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt to cause trouble for the village too. She was certainly stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Look, now Lady Miharu is troubled, and her firm resolution may end up wavering. It's a bad habit of Lord Rio's to act too considerately," Ursula said with a grin at Miharu.

Rio gave an awkward and strained smile before looking at the head elders and the spirit folk girls and bowing his head. "…That is most shameful of me. Then, I shall take you up on your offer. Can I ask that of you?"

"Of course!" Sara, Orphia, and Alma agreed enthusiastically.

"Also. For these youngsters who will one day lead the village, we normally order them to leave on a journey to the human realms to widen their views. Of course, we give them magic artifacts that change their appearance to that of a human's." *So don't worry about it,* was what Dominic was saying.

"While it still feels a little early for that… If Lord Rio is with them, then we don't need to worry. That's why it's a two way exchange," Ursula said, laughing.

"The three of you should learn about the outside world while acting as escorts for Lady Miharu. It will be a good learning experience," Syldora said, looking at the girls as he

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spoke words of encouragement.

“Yes sir!” They agreed enthusiastically.

“W-Wait!” Latifa yelled. She had been watching the conversation with a dazed look until now; a sudden look of panic was on her face.

Rio could tell what Latifa was thinking and called her name with a troubled look. “Latifa…”

“W-What about me?” Latifa asked worriedly.

“…Latifa, you stay back at the village,” Rio said to her in warning.

“N-No! If Sara and the others are going, I’m going too!” Latifa objected in shock.

“You can’t.” Rio shook his head bluntly.

“Why not?!” Latifa questioned with tears in her eyes.

“…You have bad memories of the Strahl region, do you not?” Rio asked with difficulty.

“Yes, but…!” Latifa’s face contorted as she clenched her fists.

“You’ve been waiting at the village all this time, remember? It’s not like we’re going to play,” Rio scratched his neck, trying to admonish Latifa.

“This is different than before! Miharu’s group is going, Sara and the others are going, Aishia is waiting over there… I don’t want to be the only one left behind! Take me with you this time! Just this time!” Latifa pleaded desperately.

Latifa… Miharu watched Latifa in frustration.

Yesterday, after talking to Latifa alone, Miharu had found out just how much Latifa loved Rio. She understood why Latifa was so desperate more than anyone else present. She didn’t want to be left behind by Haruto — Miharu decided to attend the banquet and hold her own future in her hands because of that, so she could relate.

“Umm, I know I’m not in the position to ask for anything, but can’t Latifa come along too?” Miharu could no longer sit still and pleaded Rio and the head elders.

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“Not you too, Miharu…” Rio was completely at a loss.

“Hmm, I don’t think we should reject her accompanying you without listening to her first,” Ursula, who was also Latifa’s guardian, suddenly said.

“…May I ask why?” Rio asked Ursula with a small sigh.

“Three years ago, when you told Latifa you were leaving for the Yagumo region, Latifa did not ask to go along with you, though she did ask you not to go. Is that right?” Ursula confirmed with Rio.

“Yes.” Rio nodded uncomfortably.

“Back then, she was still unconsciously afraid of going outside. That’s probably why Latifa herself didn’t think of leaving the village. But this time, she’s requesting to go outside of her own volition. If so, this could be a good opportunity for her to grow in order to erase her past scars.” Ursula looked back on the past emotionally as she spoke of the benefits of Latifa heading to the Strahl region.

“…” Rio didn’t want to dismiss Latifa’s feelings and ignore an opportunity for her to grow either. However, he was still worried as her older brother, fearing her trauma would resurface.

“I want to go with Onii-chan. I want to stay by your side.” Latifa slowly stood up, approaching Rio and fearfully grabbing his sleeve.

As everyone in the room focused their attention on them, Rio hesitated for a long moment before speaking up. “…I have conditions.”

“W-What?!” Latifa’s face brightened immediately.

“…Even if we go there, you won’t be able to stay with me constantly. Miharu and I have to attend the banquet, so you absolutely have to listen to the words of Aishia, or Sara, or Professor Celia, who will be with us there.”

“Okay!”

“You can’t whine at them and cause trouble. You must refrain from acting selfishly. If you want to go anywhere, you

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cannot go alone — you get absorbed in things too quickly. Also…”

“Fu…” A giggle could be heard in the room.

“…Is something the matter?” Rio looked around at the people in the room curiously. The head elders, spirit folk girls, and humans were all smiling in amusement.

“Nothing, we were just thinking that you’re rather overprotective,” Ursula said.

“…I still have another condition. Unless you get proper permission from Elder Syldora and Dominic too, you can’t come along. It’s the village’s law.” Rio sighed tiredly.

“I don’t mind,” said Dominic.

“Me neither,” Syldora answered immediately.

“…I would have appreciated a little more than just that,” Rio said, candidly expressing his bewilderment.

“The reason is as Ursula said. What more do you want us to say? You’ve covered all the warnings yourself. That’s why I choose not to say anything. That’s all.” Dominic smiled faintly and shrugged his shoulders.

“If I had to say, then Latifa’s development has been a bit of a special case. We’ve considered those circumstances too. In regards to the concerns, my judgment is that it is not a problem if Lord Rio is there,” Syldora said.

“…Yeah, if I could add one thing. If you need a new lodging to stay in while on the move, I can prepare an extra stone house. After we made the previous one for you, we found it so fun that we made a couple more. This would be one of those. They’re extra anyway, so take it with you,” Dominic offered generously.

“Oh? In that case, you can depart immediately. When will you go?” Ursula was completely in favor of that and pushed the conversation forward.

“…There’s still time before the banquet, but I wouldn’t want to be late because of issues while moving. I think the earlier the better,” Rio replied, giving up.

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“At the latest, a few days, and at the earliest, the day after tomorrow? Which means…”

Ursula placed a hand against her mouth and hummed in thought.

“We need to throw a party for everyone’s departure!” Dryas manifested in a corner of the room. The sudden appearance of the high rank spirit left everyone wide eyed in shock.

“…Lady Dryas, were you listening?” Ursula asked, sighing in exasperation.

“Yes, but just the end. It didn’t seem like the right mood to interrupt, so I was being considerate,” Dryas replied in a pleasant mood. She truly was whimsical and elusive.

“No wonder Ariel stirred within me for a moment.”

“Hel too…”

“Ifritah as well.”

Sara and Alma had also sensed the change in their contract spirits. Spirits could sense other spirits’ presences, so they had probably noticed Dryas approaching in her spirit form.

“Heh, I was hiding my aura pretty seriously too… You kids have grown as well,” Dryas praised, impressed by the contract spirits residing within the spirit folk girls. “By the way, is Aishia not here this time? She hasn’t suddenly learned how to completely hide her aura… right?” she asked, looking around the room.

“Yes, this time she’s waiting back at the Strahl region,” Rio answered with a smile.

“I see. Well, I’ve heard the general gist of things and we can discuss the details later, but for now, it’s time to celebrate everyone’s departure with a party! Let’s get ready!” Dryas suggested triumphantly.

“Understood. How about tomorrow night? We can use the food hall in the town hall where we held the party when they first arrived too. If villagers are going to the outside world,

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various people need to be informed too.” Ursula seemed to have intended on doing that to begin with, as she wrapped up the talk immediately.

“Sara, Orphia, Alma,” Syldora called out.

“Yes,” the spirit folk girls replied, bracing themselves.

“Go back to your parents’ homes tonight. Other than your own will and our permission, you need the agreement from your blood relatives too. Inform your families with your own words — that you have been handed a duty.”

“Yes!” At Syldora’s order, the three of them agreed enthusiastically. Thus, it was decided that the party to celebrate their departure would be held tomorrow night.

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The next night, everyone gathered in the dining room at the lowest floor of the town hall. All the upper echelons of the village and their families were gathered and chatting pleasantly. The tables around the room were crammed with food and drinks prepared to celebrate their departure.

“Miharu! I wanted to learn more recipes from you, and talk to you about so much more! It’s going to be lonely. I’m so sad,” the werecat Anya lamented as she clung to Miharu.

At present, Miharu was surrounded by Anya and the young women of the village who were sadly saying their farewells. They were all students of the cooking classroom that Miharu held.

“I wanted to talk to you guys more too,” Miharu replied with a sad smile.

“Hmph, okay! We can have a long talk just between us girls! Nothing gloomy allowed! We’ll have lots of fun with girl talk!” Anya said with enthusiasm, squeezing Miharu tightly. The girls around them were all on board too, making an excited fuss.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the room, Vera was also grieving

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over saying farewell to Latifa and Aki. “Ugh, sudden farewells are so sad! I can’t believe Latifa is going too!” Her eyes were filled with tears as she hugged the two of them.

“Ahaha, that hurts, Vera.” Despite saying that, Latifa didn’t actually resist, just standing there being hugged with a quiet expression.

“…Sorry. It was decided suddenly,” Aki said apologetically.

“Aww… you leave tomorrow, right? When will we meet again?” Vera asked, clinging to Aki and Latifa.

“…I don’t know. But I want to see Vera again. If I can come back, then I want to. You’re my precious friend, after all,” Aki explained, expressing thoughts that were separate from her feelings of wanting to see her brother and Satsuki and return home.

“It’s a promise! If you don’t come, I’ll cry!” Vera said, sniffling as she hugged the two of them even tighter.

“Yup…” Aki and Latifa nodded solemnly.

“Geez, you’re all exaggerating so much,” Arslan said tiredly. He and Masato had been watching the exchange silently beside them the entire time.

“Haha, right,” Masato agreed with a strained smile.

“You say that, but aren’t the two of you going to say goodbye?! Latifa aside, we don’t know if Aki and Masato will be able to come back.” Vera puffed her cheeks up indignantly, glaring at them with a reproachful look.

“No… Well, doing that between men is a bit, you know. A bit shameful, or weak looking? It makes me itchy,” Arslan said, scratching his neck.

“That’s right. Anyway, I intend on coming back. I still haven’t won against him once yet, after all,” Masato said, glancing at Arslan, who stood beside him.

“Ha, as if. I’m going to get even stronger. I won’t lose next time we meet, either,” Arslan snorted smugly.

“Well, you just wait. Until I get stronger, that is.”

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“Ha, I guess I can wait, though I’m not expecting anything. …Just be careful on your trip.”

“Yeah.”

They both reached for a fist bump. Vera stared closely at the exchange between the two boys. “What’s with that? After saying those wannabe cool things, you’re being so much more embarrassing than both of us,” she said bluntly with a cold gaze.

“Oh, I thought that too!”

“Me too!”

Latifa and Aki immediately agreed.

“Geez, you could be a little more honest.” Aki grinned, looking at Masato and Arslan.

“Right?”

“Right.”

Latifa and Vera nodded while giggling.

“H-Huh?! That’s not true!” Masato and Arslan both objected with red faces.

“Aww, but it’s true. Right, you two?” Vera rebutted with a huff of laughter, then turned to Latifa and Aki and imitated Arslan’s words. “…Just be careful on your trip.”

“Yeah.” Aki put on her sharpest expression and imitated Masato, then fistbumped Latifa.

“Ugh…” Masato and Arslan were bright red as they watched.

“I-I don’t know you anymore! Let’s go, Masato!”

“Y-Yeah!” Masato and Arslan retreated from the scene in embarrassment.

“Fufu.” The remaining girls watched their backs and giggled.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the venue…

“I leave my daughter and her friends to you, Lord Rio.”

Rio, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were talking with the head elders and the relatives of the spirit folk girls. Sara’s father, a silver werewolf man, was entrusting Sara and the others to

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Rio.

Rio nodded. “Yes. If anything, I’ll be the one in their care…” he said apologetically.

“No, this journey will be a valuable learning experience for our daughters. If you and Lady Aishia act as their guides, we will happily send them away.” Orphia’s father, a high elf man, was speaking cheerfully. However, despite saying that, Rio probably wasn’t imagining the slightly saddened expression on his face.

“Well, as they say: they have to leave the nest at some point. Look after my daughter, Lord Rio!” Alma’s father grabbed Rio’s shoulder heartily. He was younger than Dominic, but his face and body language was very similar to the head elder’s.

While Sara and Orphia’s fathers didn’t look that much older than their daughters, Alma’s father had a face that looked to be around middle-aged for humans. This was a characteristic of the dwarf race, where the males generally had older faces.

“I cannot express my gratitude enough to everyone for entrusting me with their precious daughters. I may rely on them more than they’ll need me, but I vow to protect them to the best of my ability,” Rio pledged respectfully.

At that, Sara and the others blushed in embarrassment.

“Gahaha, that’s like a marriage vow. The girls are getting embarrassed, Rio.” Dominic laughed heartily, slapping Rio on the shoulder.

“Please don’t say such strange things!” Sara and Alma objected to Dominic’s words together.

“Ahaha, well, I’ll be in your care too, Sara, Orphia, Alma,” Rio said, hiding his embarrassment with a wry smile and bowing his head.

“Uh, s-same here, we’ll be counting on you!” Sara’s cheeks reddened, her tail wagging nervously as she bowed her head.

“Thank you, Rio.” Orphia and Alma said. Rio nodded with

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a faint smile.

“No need to be so formal. From yesterday through today, the girls spent time at their homes and discussed things thoroughly. On top of that, these old men agreed to it and decided to entrust their daughters to you,” Dominic said, patting Rio on the shoulder. “We’re counting on you.”

The fathers all turned their faces away in embarrassment, taking sips of their drinks instead.

“That aside, grandfather. Did you teach Latifa weird words?” Alma sighed in disappointment at Dominic.

“…Hum, whatever could you be talking about?” Dominic cocked his head in wonder.

“Don’t try to play the fool. I’m talking about the local mistress thing!” Alma stated resolutely, refusing to listen to any excuses.

“A-Ahem,” the fathers spat out their drinks, clearing their throats.

“Hey! Old man! What do you think you’re teaching children?!” Alma’s father protested at Dominic in a fluster.

“A-Ah, that? I remember now. I was talking to Latifa about Rio before when my mouth slipped from habit. Well, she probably doesn’t understand it anyway.” Dominic laughed heartily in an attempt to brush off the situation.

“That’s not the problem!” said Alma.

“I-It’s fine, it’s fine. Say, what about you? You’re only a year apart from Latifa. Did you know the meaning?” Dominic said teasingly.

“Uh…!” Alma turned bright red.

“Please don’t tease Alma too much, Dominic,” Rio warned gently as he stood in front of Alma.

“R-Right.” Dominic must have felt some kind of strange pressure from Rio, as he nodded dejectedly.

“I have a little more to say regarding the incident with Latifa. Shall we discuss it over a drink?” Rio sighed tiredly, inviting Dominic to some alcohol.

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“Sure, sounds good. All right, you lot come along too! It’s a drinking party for men now!” Dominic called the fathers over in high spirits.

The party continued noisily and late into the night.

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The next morning came; it was finally time for Rio to take Miharu and the others back to the Strahl region.

“All right, do you have everything?” Dominic asked, looking at the departing party.

“Yes, I believe so.” Rio looked around at the group and answered on their behalf.

“…Ah!” Vera suddenly remembered something.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Vera?” Ursula asked.

“U-Umm. Latifa, Latifa.” Vera dashed up to her.

“What’s wrong, Vera?” Latifa tilted her head curiously.

“Did you bring the thing?”

“The thing?”

“You know, the thing. The uniforms you made to surprise Rio,” Vera whispered in Latifa’s ear.

“Ooh! That thing. Yup, I brought everyone’s along.” Latifa smiled and nodded in understanding.

“That’s great to hear! You have to surprise Rio, after all.”

“Me…?” Rio must have caught Vera’s words, as he looked on in confusion.

“It’s a secret. You’ll definitely be surprised. I wanted to see it too, but I was told it was a surprise for when you came back, so,” Vera said, grinning.

“I see. I look forward to it, then,” Rio chuckled, looking at Latifa.

“Yup! Aki, Latifa, take care of yourselves. I’ll pray for your safe return,” Vera replied energetically.

“Yeah,” Latifa and Aki nodded. “We’ll be going now!”

“All right, let’s go,” Rio called out to Latifa and Aki.

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“Okay!” Latifa said happily, running over to Rio. Meanwhile, Aki approached the giant bird-like spirit, Ariel, waiting next to Orphia.

“Okay everyone, get on Ariel!” Orphia said to Miharu, Aki, Masato, and Sara. The group gathered on Ariel’s back with familiarity, having rode the spirit many times already.

“Yup, there’s enough space for four people there. I’ll carry Alma and Rio will carry Latifa — it’s perfect!” Orphia said in satisfaction once everyone had climbed on Ariel’s back.

“Yup! This is the best option!” Latifa agreed, extremely pleased. She was probably happy that she’d get to stick to Rio through the whole journey.

The only ones who could soar freely through the air among the group were Rio, Orphia, and Ariel. It wasn’t as though Sara and Alma couldn’t fly at all, but their skill was lacking in comparison to Rio and Orphia, so it was faster traveling this way.

That was where the issue of who carried whom came up, and it was decided that the lightest Latifa and Alma would be carried by Rio and Orphia while the remaining members rode on Ariel’s back.

“Don’t move around, okay?” Rio said, picking Latifa up in a princess carry.

“Yup!” Latifa nodded happily.

“…” Alma watched the scene with slight envy.

“You’ll have to put up with me, Alma.” Orphia giggled at Alma.

“There’s nothing to put up with. Thank you for this,” Alma said, climbing onto Orphia’s back.

“Yup,” Orphia replied cheerfully, while Latifa pointed at the sky energetically.

“Okay, let’s go! Full steam ahead!”

“We’ll be going now, everyone!” Rio chuckled, then turned to face everyone who had gathered to see them off. He gently floated into the air, with Orphia and Ariel following close

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behind.

“Take care!”

“Look after our daughters!”

“Teach me cooking again sometime, Miharu!”

“Let’s play again when you’re back! It’s a promise!”

“Get stronger, Masato!”

Many voices echoed around them.

“Everyone, thank you so much for everything! We’ll definitely come back again! We want to come back again!” Miharu looked down below her and yelled her farewells loudly, which was rare coming from her.

“Later!”

“I want to come back again too!”

Despite having exchanged so many farewells yesterday, Aki and Masato yelled their goodbyes as well.

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Chapter 6: Chance Encounter

Fifteen days after Rio and the others departed from the spirit folk village…

The journey had progressed without any particular obstacles, allowing them to reach the Strahl region safely. It was thanks to Rio choosing a safer route, having traveled between the spirit folk village and the Strahl region numerous times now.

It was before noon; their current location was far above the easternmost area of the Galarc Kingdom, known as the Nephilim Mountains — the mountain range that separated the Strahl region from the Wilderness.

“The Strahl region is past here,” Rio informed the others.

“So this is…” There was still no sign of civilization, but Sara and the other spirit folk girls looked down at their first glance of the vast Strahl region in awe.

“…” Latifa also stared down at the view before them.

“Are you scared, Latifa?” Rio asked.

“Nope, because Onii-chan’s with me! I’m fine!” Latifa answered, tightly hugging Rio, who was still carrying her.

“I see. If you feel uneasy at all, you can rely on me and the people around you.”

“Yup!” Latifa replied obediently to Rio’s gentle words.

“We’ve come back again. To the Strahl region…” Aki must have been nervous, as she was looking downwards restlessly.

“I hope we can find Takahisa,” Miharu said, squeezing Aki’s hand.

“Yup. Please ask Satsuki everything on my behalf, Miharu,” Aki said with a nod, squeezing Miharu’s hand back.

“First, we have to head to Aishia. Now that we’ve come

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this far, we should arrive before sundown. I'll continue leading the way like I have been, so follow me," Rio called out to the group flying behind him.

"Okay!" Miharu and the others focused and nodded firmly.

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Several hours later, before sundown — exactly as planned…

Rio led the others to an area by the outskirts of the Galarc Kingdom's capital.

"It should be near the rocks here…" Rio searched through his memory as he looked down at the rocky area down below.

Just like hiding a tree in a forest, he had placed the rock house by other rocks. He could already feel his connection to Aishia nearby, but all the boulders were making it hard to search. *Welcome home, Haruto.* The telepathic message suddenly echoed in Rio's head.

Aishia, I'm home. Good timing — I was just having trouble locating the house. Can you lead me there? Rio smiled wryly. If they could communicate telepathically, Aishia must be very close by.

Yeah, I'm heading to you now.

Hm? …Ah, there you are. Rio spotted the figured closing in on them from diagonally to the right and smiled. His eyes had been fixed downwards, so he was a little slow to notice.

"It's Lady Aishia." Sara and the others had also noticed her.

"Welcome back." Aishia came to a stop before them in a flash, calling out to Rio and the group.

"Ai-chan… we're back." Seeing Aishia for the first time in a while had Miharu's eyes tearing up.

"Welcome home, Miharu," Aishia said.

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“It’s been a long time, Lady Aishia,” Sara said respectfully.

“Long time no see, Aishia!” Latifa called out happily.

“Hello, everyone. Celia’s waiting, so let me lead you to the house first. This way,” Aishia said, turning to head back in the direction she came. The party followed behind her, soaring through the air. Less than a minute later —

“We’re here. Over there.” Aishia pointed below. There was the rock house, with Celia standing outside waving her arms.

“That woman must be Rio’s teacher,” Alma muttered quietly.

“I’m nervous, but I hope I can introduce myself properly and become friends!” Orphia said with enthusiasm.

“Agreed,” Alma nodded with a small smile. Before long, they were landing on the ground. As everyone set their feet down, Celia welcomed the party with a little bewilderment.

“T-That’s a lot of people…”

“I’m home, Professor.”

“Y-Yeah. Welcome home…” Celia replied fearfully. She first looked at Latifa being carried in a princess hold, then around at Miharu and Sara and the others.

There are so many cute girls… I wonder what their relationship is?! Celia was driven with the urge to ask Rio, but with so many fellow travelers present she couldn’t help but hesitate.

For the record, Sara and the others were currently using magic artifacts in the shape of necklaces to appear like humans, hiding their racial features like ears and tails so that Celia couldn’t see.

“…” Latifa and the others watched Celia in captivation.

“…She really is young.” Sara looked at the woman she had heard about in curious wonder.

“She’s about the same height as Aki and Latifa, or maybe a bit taller?” Orphia said, cocking her head.

“She’s a very beautiful person,” Alma murmured, staring fixedly at Celia.

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“H-Hey, who are these people? The Miharu person is among them, right?” Celia asked hesitantly. She must have felt uncomfortable from all the attention.

“Yes. That’s correct, but I’m not sure where to begin explaining. Introductions are in order too, so how about we head inside first?” Rio suggested with a troubled look.

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The group then moved to the living room of the rock house.

“Shall we all have a seat? To make introductions easier, can you all sit in groups of where you came from? Professor, you can come sit next to me,” Rio said, then sat on the three-seater sofa with Celia.

“I’ll go pour the tea, then,” Aishia volunteered.

“Ah, I’ll help, Ai-chan,” Miharu immediately offered.

Orphia stepped up too. “I’ll help too…”

“It’s fine. I already know everyone here, so the two of you should stay.” Aishia shook her head before departing. At that, Miharu and Orphia quietly sat down.

“Let’s get straight to it with introductions and an explanation of what’s going on,” Rio began. He was the only one other than Aishia who knew everyone present, so he had to take the lead. “First of all, this is Professor Celia. She’s my former teacher.”

Celia bowed awkwardly. “Hello…” Having ran away from the Kingdom of Beltrum, she wasn’t sure where to start with her introduction.

“I’m sorry. I know this must be very sudden, but I’ve given them a simple explanation of your circumstances — but only as much as they need. They also have their own rather special circumstances and would never reveal your information to anyone else, which I can guarantee. They’ll explain their background after this, so could you introduce

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yourself first, Professor?" Rio said to Celia quietly, his tone apologetic. Meanwhile, Sara and the others watched him speak while feeling slightly nervous.

"...All right. It's a promise, okay?" Celia looked over at the rather stiff-faced girls and agreed in exasperation.

"Umm, like Rio said, I'm his former teacher, Celia Claire," she began courteously. "I'm actually a noble from the Kingdom of Beltrum, but certain circumstances placed me under the care of Rio right now. Have you heard about what happened already?" she asked Rio, wondering what they knew thus far.

"Yes, very briefly. I apologize," Rio said awkwardly.

"There's no need to apologize." Celia shook her head with a strained smile. "I'll show you what I really look like, then." She untied her hair, then removed the necklace artifact that was changing the color of her hair, changing her hair from blonde to silver.

"Whoa..." Masato let slip a sound of awe, captivated by Celia.

"..." Miharu and the rest all looked at Celia's change in wonderment.

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“As you can see, I am disguised when in front of other people, but… It’s kind of embarrassing being stared at like that?” Celia said, shyly tilting her head and seeking Rio for help. However, Rio just chuckled and shrugged.

“Wait, huh? Don’t tell me… is there something weird about me?” Celia gasped, searching her hair and face in a panic; she was feeling to see if her appearance had fallen out of sorts in a flustered manner. However, when she couldn’t find any abnormality, she watched Rio’s expression beside her as she hesitantly lowered her hands.

“Everyone’s surprised at how cute you are, Professor,” Rio offered with an amused look.

“C-Cute… W-Why are you smiling?” Celia blushed and puffed up her cheeks, glaring at Rio reproachfully.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think everyone would be this nervous, so it was funny to me,” Rio said with a huff of laughter at Miharu and the other girls.

“…Excuse me,” Sara bowed. “You’re just so beautiful, I couldn’t help but stare in awe.”

“T-Thank you.” Celia thanked her in embarrassment at the frank praise.

“Next, I’ll introduce Sara and the others,” Rio continued. “There’s a few of them, so any detailed talk can be saved for later between yourselves.”

“Okay,” Sara said.

“This is Sara. She’s the same age as me and we met after I first ran away from Beltrum. We’ve had a close relationship ever since, but she’s actually not a human from the Strahl region.”

“She’s one of the people you were talking about before, right? Of the people you met who lived secretly in the Wilderness…” Celia observed the expressions on Rio and the girls and confirmed fearfully.

“Yes, they’re the ones who live there,” Rio said. He had kept information about the spirit folk village secret until

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now, but he had obtained Sara's acceptance to reveal it now that everything had come to this.

"I see..." Celia looked at their faces once more. Their existence had come up in conversation briefly before, so she did have a small hunch about it, but she'd never expected to actually meet the people living outside of the Strahl region.

"They're officially called 'spirit folk,' but it's only an umbrella term, so it doesn't refer to their specific species. That's where their secret lies, you can say..." Realizing the need to explain further, Rio grasped for words as he glanced over at them.

"Rio, I'll take over from here," Sara said as she took a small deep breath, feeling it best if she revealed the secret herself.

"Sure, please go ahead." Rio nodded deeply.

"...Just like how you trusted Rio and us enough to reveal your identity, we also trust you as Rio's teacher, and will reveal our own identities." Sara, speaking somewhat in an uneasy manner, nervously took off the necklace she had been wearing. Up until now, Sara only appeared as though she was human. However, wolf ears popped out of her head as she took off the necklace. At the same time, a fluffy tail also came into view.

"Huh?!" Celia widened her eyes in shock.

"The magic artifact Sara just took off holds disguising sorcery more complex than in the one used to change your hair color, Professor. You can clearly see why it was used," Rio explained from the side.

In the Strahl region, werebeasts, dwarves, and elves were species that couldn't exist as normal citizens — the only exception were slaves like Latifa had been. On top of that, their population was extremely small. Thus, their value as a commodity was high, and many royals and wealthy merchants craved to own them as pet slaves.

Because of this, Sara and the others were afraid because

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they couldn't imagine how Celia would think of them. Rio had told them that it would be fine in advance, but they still couldn't ease their anxieties.

"Oh, umm, are you a were… beast?" Celia blinked her eyes intensely and stared at Sara's face and ears. She was simply surprised, with no sign of greed or disdain in her eyes.

"Yes, this is Sara, a silver werewolf-type of werebeast," Rio replied.

"Nice to meet you," Sara bowed her head timidly.

"Yes, you too…" Celia meekly bowed her head back.

"Umm, what do you think about me?" Sara, taking a plunge, asked straightforwardly.

"Well, it's my first time seeing such a thing, so I'm simply surprised, I guess. You're really cute," a puzzled Celia answered.

"…Thank you," Sara replied with a bewildered expression. Orphia, Alma, and Latifa breathed a sigh of relief, reassured by Celia's reaction.

"It's just as I said, right? That Professor Celia would interact with all of you like normal people," Rio said to them and chuckled.

"What do you mean?" Celia asked in confusion.

"You know how non-human species get treated like slaves in the Strahl region?"

"Oh, I get it now. Of course you'd be wary because of that. I'm sorry," Celia said a strained smile.

"N-No, you don't need to apologize! If anything, we're sorry for antagonizing you without any basis," Sara apologized back in a fluster.

"It's all right — don't worry about it," Celia said with a smile, and looked at Orphia, Alma, and Latifa who were all sitting together. "But if you're a werebeast, then are the other three over there also…?"

"I'm a high elf, and my name is Orphia!" Orphia exclaimed, introducing herself with a smile. Then, like Sara,

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she took off her artifact necklace and revealed her elf ears.

“I’m Alma, an elder dwarf.” Alma bowed before she also took off her necklace. Once she did, her narrow dwarf ears came into view.

With puzzled eyes at the appearances of the two new species, Celia turned to Rio next to her. “...I remember reading about this before, but high elves and elder dwarves are like the royalty of elves and dwarves, right?”

“Yes. Monarchy doesn’t actually exist in their village, but viewing it in that way might make it easier to understand. Sara also comes from a prestigious family in her village, so all three of them are the princesses in their respective species.”

“Oh, I see... Who’s the other one, then?”

And why are you traveling with people of such high status? — thought Celia, but she turned to stare at Latifa, who sat quietly next to Sara.

“I’m a werefox, and my name is Latifa! I’m Onii-chan’s little sister! Nice to meet you!” Latifa awkwardly introduced herself with a high-pitched voice, her whole body tensed up. After hurriedly taking off her necklace like the others, her fox ears and tail appeared.

“...Yeah, nice meeting you. Wait, s-sister?! You had a sister?! And such an adorable one with fox ears at that! Y-You never told me!” Celia gazed at Latifa’s fox ears with an astounded face as she bowed, but once she processed Latifa’s words in her mind, her expression changed at once and she turned on Rio.

“P-Professor, please calm down. I’ll explain everything,” Rio said in a fluster, but then, Aishia returned from the kitchen.

“The tea has been brewed. Let it steam for a few more minutes and it’ll be ready to drink.” After placing the tray with the tea on the table, she sat in the empty spot next to Rio.

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“Y-Yeah…” Celia calmed at Aishia’s appearance, feeling embarrassed when she realized how she had lost her cool in front of the others.

“There’s too much to explain, so I’ll just give you the overview for now. I met Latifa after I ran away from the Kingdom of Beltrum. I ended up taking care of her, so although we’re not connected by blood, I became her guardian as an older brother,” Rio explained concisely.

“Oh, I see…” Celia nodded dejectedly. There were still many things she wanted to ask, but she refrained from derailing the conversation.

“And so, Latifa, Miharu, Aki, and Masato have been living hidden in Sara’s village until now, but with the discovery of the hero Satsuki’s whereabouts, I’m bringing them back to the Strahl region. It would be difficult to transport them all to the Strahl region by myself, so Sara and the others helped carry them. They’re also using this opportunity to deepen their insights outside their village,” Rio explained, getting straight to the point.

“…I get the overall gist. So you’re talking about the three over there, right?” Letting a small breath out, Celia glanced over at the group sitting away from Sara.

“Yes. They were the three involved in the summoning of the heroes. The oldest girl is Miharu, the other girl is Aki, and the boy is Aki’s younger brother, Masato,” Rio said, introducing them all together.

“Hi, I’m Miharu Ayase. Nice to meet you,” Miharu greeted a bit nervously.

“I’m Aki Sendo.”

“I’m Masato Sendo.”

“Pleased to meet you too. Miharu, Aki, Masato, right? And then Sara, Orphia, Alma, Latifa… Okay, I’ve memorized everyone’s names. Once again, nice to meet you all. Oh, do you mind if I speak to you informally? You can call me anything you want in the house as well,” Celia replied with a

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soft smile.

“Of course,” everyone agreed at the same time.

“But wow, I’m amazed. Even though there’s so many people…” Masato said in awe at Celia’s quick memorization of everyone’s names and faces.

“Her mind works differently from yours,” Aki said with a giggle.

“Heh, and yours too, Aki. She’s pretty and has a nice personality — how perfect,” Masato retaliated with a smirk.

“S-Shut up. I knew that from the moment I saw her,” Aki pouted in indignation.

“Haha, the siblings are fighting again. You’re so close, aren’t you?” Latifa smiled in amusement.

“That’s not true!” Aki and Masato denied in unison.

“…Fufu, how funny,” Celia’s eyes widened as she smiled softly.

Rio observed Celia’s facial expression and decided to announce the start of their new living arrangements. “So, I’m sorry about how sudden this is, but until the aforementioned banquet starts, everyone will be living here together for a while. It might get a little rowdy…”

“Of course, I’m all for it. It’s only been me and Aishia for a while, so I’m looking forward to things getting livelier around here,” Celia said happily with a laugh. Although there were still many complicated issues at the forefront, she somehow felt as though exciting days were about to begin.

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They talked in the living room for nearly an hour after that. However, with the time being evening, Masato’s growling stomach signaled the start of dinner preparations.

“We’ll prepare dinner tonight, so Rio should go take a bath with Masato,” suggested Orphia, and so it was decided that Rio and Masato would bathe together first. After Rio

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and Masato headed to the bath, washed their bodies, and relaxed in the bathtub —

"…Hey, Haruto," Masato suddenly said.

"Hm? What's up?" Rio was absentmindedly staring up at the ceiling, but turned his gaze to Masato. Then, because Masato had an unexpectedly serious look on his face, he found himself reflexively adjusting his posture.

"Do you like anyone within the group, Haruto?" Masato asked abruptly.

"…You scared me for a moment there. What's up with this, all of a sudden?" The anticlimax had Rio deflating, hanging his head tiredly.

"Well, I was just wondering if you never felt anything, being surrounded by such impressive girls." Masato laughed out loud before explaining his thought process behind the question.

"I mean, I don't know what to say…" Rio looked up at the ceiling with a worried face.

"And? Who is it?" Masato asked insistently.

"This isn't the time for that, I think," Rio replied, a faint smile on his face.

"Why?" Masato asked curiously.

"…Because I was originally traveling with a purpose. Even if I liked someone, I wouldn't be able to stay with them forever. That's why it's not the time to be falling for anyone," Rio said a little sadly.

"That's… not true, though? You can just travel together." Masato tilted his head in doubt.

"It's not as simple as that, probably…" Rio smiled bitterly. Having crossed swords with Lucius and making him aware of his existence, Rio could no longer turn back. From here on, it was an exchange of blood for blood. Rio would try to kill Lucius, and Lucius would reciprocate.

As long as either of them survived… No, even if one of them succeeded, a new grudge could be born in someone

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else instead. It would be the start of a vicious cycle of revenge. He would have to live in fear of an invisible danger — of being sought as a target of revenge himself. That was what it meant to devote yourself to revenge.

And so, he couldn't seek his own happiness, couldn't expose the person he liked to danger over someone as worthless as himself — that was what Rio thought, though he didn't voice it out loud. Instead —

"What about you, Masato? Is there a girl in the house that you like?" he asked Masato, hoping to distract him.

"Nope, there isn't." Masato shook his head bluntly.

"How come?" asked Rio.

"No, well… I guess I did ask you a similar question." Masato hummed in thought and scratched his head. "I mean, I think everyone's pretty cute. I admire them too. Honestly, they're all beautiful. But…"

"But?" Rio parroted back at Masato.

"It's just, I don't really see them in that way for some reason. I guess I've been around them for so long, they all seem like my older sisters. And…" Masato trailed off, staring at Rio.

Aki aside, it seems like all the others are in love with you already. I've only just met Celia, and I get the same feeling from her too. Ah, but I'm not too sure about Miharu…

"…And, what?" Rio stared back at Masato curiously.

"No, it's nothing. I might get out now. I'm getting lightheaded." Masato shook his head with a wry smile and stood up.

"…It looks like you've been training properly." Rio observed Masato's muscles from close up and grinned.

"…Wait, is it possible that you like men, Haruto?!" Masato gasped and hurried to hide his body.

"Give me a break," Rio denied in exasperation.

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Meanwhile, during the time Rio and Masato were in the bath, the entire group of eight girls — Miharu, Aishia, Celia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Aki — were working together to prepare dinner. Miharu and Orphia took the lead in the cooking and the other girls assisted them, progressing smoothly but noisily.

Eventually, Rio and Masato left the bathroom, and within an hour, dinner was ready. The dining table Dominic had set up boasted a fairly large size, but with ten peoples' worth of food, it was packed rather tightly.

"I want to be next to Onii-chan! Celia can sit over there!" Latifa swiftly and shrewdly acquired her seat next to Rio, then urged Celia into the seat on Rio's other side.

"Thank you… Then, if you don't mind," Celia giggled and took the seat next to Rio. Aishia sat beside her. Miharu, Sara, and the others also took their seats. Then once everyone was seated at the dining table —

"Let's eat!" Orphia declared, and they began their social dinner with the goal of getting to know Celia.

"Thank you for the food! It looks great again today. I'm so hungry! Yum!" Masato's eyes sparkled as he reached for the delicious food with his chopsticks. He stuffed his cheeks with the piping hot karaage, puffing as he gave his thoughts. He then proceeded to gulp down white rice.

"Mind your table manners — it's embarrassing. Celia's here too," Aki puffed her cheeks and muttered.

"Fufu, I think boys look much cooler when they eat heartily," Celia complimented Masato with a smile.

"Heh, hear that?!" Masato grinned happily.

"…Don't let it get to your head." Aki sighed tiredly.

"You should eat too, Aki. Miharu and the others went out of their way to make us such delicious food, after all."

"Wha— hey, I helped too! I made some of it!"

"Heh, which one?" Masato asked with a smirk.

"Ugh… T-This salad and the dressing." Aki blushed and

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pointed at the salad and dressing placed on the table.

“Hmm, I guess it looks good.”

“It tastes good too! I know you don’t like vegetables, but make sure you eat some,” Aki said, serving some onto Masato’s plate.

“I-I’m fine. Hey, not that much!” Masato tried to stop Aki in a panic, but it was too late. A heap of vegetables was placed on the plate before Masato.

“Blergh. I hate tomatoes…” Masato groaned in disappointment.

“You won’t grow as strong as Haruto if you’re picky about your food,” Aki said.

“This salad dressing is delicious, Aki. It’s been emulsified properly.” Rio must have been listening to their conversation, as he spoke up.

“T-Thank you very much.” The sudden words took Aki by surprise, and she thanked him shyly. The bustling meal continued for a while, when Celia suddenly spoke up, as though the thought suddenly came to mind.

“By the way, Rio. Have you decided on your plans for the future? There’s still some time before the banquet.”

“Yes, about that. Miharu wants to attend the banquet too, so I was thinking of going to Amande together to propose a meeting with Liselotte. There’s no guarantee we can see her right away, so it may take several days…”

“True, you won’t know that until you go. Then will we be waiting here?”

“Yes. I’ll plan for us to all go shopping some other time, if you don’t mind.”

“I understand. I’ll spend this time getting closer to everyone else,” Celia said contently, looking between Sara, Latifa, and the others.

“Ehehe, I’m looking forward to it!” Latifa smiled happily.

“I’m sure you’ll get along with everyone in no time at all, Professor. It seems like they’ve warmed up to you a lot

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already.” Rio looked around the dining table, smiling.

“Yes, they’ve already taught me some cooking, and we promised to all bathe together later. Right?” Celia said in a pleasant mood, looking at Latifa.

“Yes!” Latifa nodded energetically. Her speech was a little stiff towards Celia, but that was possibly because they had the biggest age gap out of everyone present. That being said, there was no distance to be felt between them, so there wasn’t a problem.

“Look after the Professor with everyone while I’m gone, Latifa.” Rio smiled gently as he spoke to Latifa.

“Yup!” Latifa said with a carefree smile.

“You two are close siblings in a way that’s different from Aki and Masato, aren’t you?” Celia smiled gently, looking at Aki and Masato, who would bicker with each other at every chance they got.

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After the dishes were put away and everyone caught their breaths, Rio offered to clean up.

“I’ll clean up the rest, so everyone can go relax.”

“Then as promised, let’s all go take that bath together!” Latifa suggested and up energetically.

“Fufu, then let’s get ready after we’re done with our tea. I’ll help clean up too.” Orphia took the initiative to agree and immediately offered to assist Rio in cleaning up. At practically the same time, Miharu stood up to help too.

“It’s fine, Orphia, Miharu. This is my thanks for making the delicious meal,” Rio said, directing the two of them to rest at ease.

“Then I’ll help carry the tableware, Haruto!” Masato said, offering to help out for once.

“Please do,” Rio said.

“Thank you, Onii-chan, Masato! I’m going to get ready

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then!” Latifa thanked the two of them before immediately heading to her room to prepare for the bath. Thus, as Rio and Masato cleaned up, the women left to undress together. They each returned to their room to get ready and head to the changing room.

“Ehehe, I’m first!” Latifa took off her clothes before anyone else and ran towards the bathtub.

“Latifa, don’t run inside here.” Sara was just in the middle of removing her bra when she spotted Latifa running inside. She placed a hand against her hip and called out to Latifa, causing her bra to softly fall to the ground.

“Fufu, how bold of you,” Orphia giggled at Sara.

“G-Geez, don’t stare at me. W-What is it, Celia?” Sara hurriedly hid her chest, but she noticed Celia staring at her and shrunk back in question.

“Nothing, it’s just… your tail…” Celia continued to stare at Sara’s tail.

“My… tail?” Sara tilted her head curiously.

Celia mustered her courage and pleaded: “Umm… M-May I please touch it?”

“…Sure, I don’t mind,” Sara agreed, smiling in amusement and agreed.

“Then, if you’d excuse me…”

“Go ahead.”

Celia reached her hand out timidly, while Sara picked up her own tail to make it easier to touch. When Celia’s hand gently reached Sara’s tail, her eyes widened in amazement.

“This is… such a thick coat!” It was bushy, but soft, making it a wonderful texture to the touch. Celia petted Sara’s tail, absorbed in how fluffy it was. Each time she touched the tail, Sara would shiver from the ticklish sensation.

“U-Umm, it feels nice, but it’s a little ticklish,” Sara said with a faint blush.

“Ah, I’m sorry! It just felt so nice to touch, I completely

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lost myself for a moment…” Celia laughed apologetically.

“N-No, please continue petting all you like,” Sara requested with a grin.

“Yes please! I’d even love to wash it!” Celia returned happily. Sara blinked blankly for a moment, before nodding with a giggle.

“…Okay. Then, if you would please.”

“Fufu, we’re going to go in first. Let’s go,” Orphia said in amusement as she, Miharu, Aki, and Alma passed them to enter the bath. Celia and Sara quickly followed them. Inside, Latifa and Aishia were already washing their bodies.

“Hmm, hm-hmm,” Latifa was humming a song as her tail swished from side to side rhythmically.

…*I’d love to touch Latifa’s tail too*. Celia stared at Latifa’s tail with great interest, deciding to ask to touch it later. For now, she had to wash her own body first.

“Now, shall we wash our hair and bodies too?” Celia suggested, lining up with Sara at the washing area and sitting on a stool. She began to carefully wash her hair, face, and body.

After Sara had carefully washed everywhere except her tail — “Umm, did you still want to wash my tail like you said?” she asked Celia beside her shyly.

“Yes, with pleasure! Is it okay to wash it just like with normal hair?” Celia said happily and moved her stool behind Sara.

“Yes, that would be fine.” Sara nodded.

“Then, I’m going to wash it now.” Celia gently grasped Sara’s tail and drenched it with warm water first, then used shampoo to gently create bubbles.

“Fufu, it feels good.” Sara smiled, feeling a little ticklish.

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“I’m glad. If I hurt you or miss any spots, just let me know.”

“Yup. By the way…” Sara opened her mouth to say something, making Celia tilt her head.

“Hmm, what is it?”

“Umm. You’ve known Rio for a long time now, right?” Sara asked, curious about Rio and Celia’s relationship. It was a little difficult to ask in front of Rio, but now was a suitable time.

“That’s right. There were a few years in between where we didn’t see each other at all, but I first met him when he was seven, and knew him for over five years after that, so you could say it’s been a while.” Celia paused in washing Sara’s tail to answer, smiling as she reflected on the memories.

“Over five years…” Sara’s eyes widened. In terms of duration of time together, it was much longer than the spirit folk had known him.

“Yes. Huh? What’s wrong, everyone? Why the sudden silence?” Celia noticed the sudden silence in the bathroom and looked around her. Everyone’s attention was completely fixed on Celia, their eyes filled with curiosity.

“Umm! I want to ask about that too! Please tell me more about the old Onii-chan!” Latifa said boldly.

“Fufu, sure. I want to know more about the Rio that everyone knows too. Let’s all talk about it together,” Celia giggled in response to Latifa.

“…Then, I will too.”

“Me too!”

Alma and Orphia offered to participate too. However, their voices echoed all over the bathroom, so there was no real point, as everyone could hear everything.

“Uh…” Miharu was about to raise her hand too, but found herself unable to muster her courage and timidly withdrew her hand. Aki watched her do so closely.

Meanwhile, Aishia was silently washing her hair.

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“Then, a question! What kind of child was Onii-chan like?” Latifa asked.

“Let’s see… Not much different to now, I guess? From the first moment we met, he was a rather mature child…” Celia replied, looking back on the past with nostalgia.

“So that’s what he was like…” Latifa accepted this with great interest.

“Ah, but his demeanor’s grown a little sharper now, I guess? Like he’s grown from a boy to a man, or matured into an adult, if I had to say?” Celia added, cocking her head.

“Then it doesn’t sound like he’s very different from the Rio we know.” Sara smiled somewhat happily.

“Come to think of it, Rio went to a school for human nobility, right? Umm, I heard that he was placed on a wanted list after being dragged into a tangle with some nobles…” Alma recalled.

“Yes, so you’ve heard about that from Rio too. He was in a bit of a special position, being an orphan and all. He was used as a convenient scapegoat,” Celia said with a frown.

“Rio… was an orphan?” This was news to Sara and the others, whose eyes widened in shock. Miharu and Aki had also been listening closely, as their eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Eh, h-huh? Didn’t you know? You knew about the academy, so I assumed… I’m sorry, please pretend you didn’t hear that… well, I guess you can’t.” Celia tried to explain herself in a panic, but slumped her shoulders when she realized she had messed up. Meanwhile, Aishia finished washing off the soap from her hair and slowly stood up, approaching Celia.

“Haruto wasn’t hiding that on purpose or anything. He didn’t tell you himself, but that was because he wasn’t asked, so he didn’t answer. Anything he wouldn’t have wanted to be spread he would have informed you of in advance, so don’t worry about it.”

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“Really?” Celia hesitantly tilted her head.

“Yup, I think so too. I knew that Onii-chan was an orphan as well, after all.” Latifa nodded.

“Is that so?” Sara asked Latifa in wonder.

“Yup, that’s why it’s fine.” Latifa gave a fleeting smile. Aishia then left them to enter the bathtub first.

“I see… But I’ll apologize to him later, just in case,” Celia sighed.

“Umm, I know I shouldn’t pry too deeply into Rio while he isn’t present, but he once stated that he wasn’t nobility. May I ask why he was attending a school for nobles?” Alma asked.

“…I can tell you the superficial truth. He saved a member of the royal family of my kingdom, so he was admitted into the academy as a reward. But with how he ultimately ended up being used as a scapegoat and was treated so coldly within the academy… it was more of a punishment than a reward,” Celia said uncomfortably.

“Was there nothing that could be done about the wanted notice?” Sara asked in frustration, unable to bear the thought of that.

“…I don’t think there was. It may sound like an excuse, but the one who made the decision was the king and an extremely small number of his nobles that controlled the kingdom. I was just a lecturer at the academy, nothing more than a researcher, so I had no real power at all. I only knew about the wanted notice by overhearing someone else, and by then it was already too late…” Celia said with an expression of deep shame and regret over her own powerlessness.

“I’m sorry for asking something so difficult to answer,” Sara apologized, her wolf ears and tail drooping.

“No no, it’s fine.” Celia shook her head weakly with a sad smile.

“Umm, then, can I ask one more question?” Orphia said,

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raising her hand.

“Of course,” Celia agreed readily.

“I’d like to ask about how you and Rio spent your time together within the academy. Rio seems really fond of you, so I assumed you must have had wonderful memories together,” Orphia said with a warm smile.

“How we spent our time… It was pretty normal, I think?” Celia tilted her head in slight embarrassment.

“I want to hear about that normal. I’m sure it was special to Rio, who was isolated from his surroundings at the time,” Orphia said, with Sara and Latifa nodding along.

“…Thank you for saying that.” Celia smiled happily.

“So what did you do specifically?” Sara had forgotten her tail was being washed as she turned around to ask Celia directly.

“L-Let’s see. There were eyes everywhere within the academy, so we spent a lot of time meeting in my research lab. We used to drink tea together often there. We would chat about things, and he’d also help with my research…” Celia looked back on the past with a smile at her lips.

“I see. So to Onii-chan, his time with Celia was his healing time.” Latifa crossed her arms and grunted in understanding. She had actually heard about Celia from Rio personally several times before, but her awareness of her as a rival was newly refreshed.

“That… might be true. I’d be happy if it was.” Celia grinned shyly.

“I’m sure it was. Right, Aishia?” Latifa nodded firmly and addressed Aishia, who was soaking in the water with Miharu and Aki. Miharu also looked over at Aishia in interest.

“Yup,” Aishia said quietly.

“See!” Latifa gave a sunny and cheerful smile.

“Thank you,” Celia said bashfully.

“I’ve said this before, but the reason why Haruto is able to open his heart to people now is because of how Celia treated

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him while he went to the academy. It's because Celia was always by Haruto's side when he was at his loneliest that Haruto didn't completely shut out others." Aishia had a rare smile on her face as she added to her words eloquently. If he hadn't had anyone he could talk to for over five years, he would have definitely stopped trusting people entirely.

"T-That's an exaggeration." Celia felt helplessly awkward, being praised so openly in front of everyone.

"Nope, I think Aishia's right. It's thanks to you being there that we were able to grow close to Onii-chan. Thank you very much," Latifa said, bowing to Celia.

"...Thank you," Sara and the others exchanged a look before bowing their heads at Celia with a giggle.

"Hey, don't make fun of me!" Celia's face reddened.

"But..." Miharu, who had been listening silently until now, opened her mouth for the first time. Everyone's attention gathered on her.

"But I think that's the truth. Because he's so kind," Miharu said with a slightly high-pitched voice. That was all she wanted to say, yet her chest was thumping uncontrollably, and she clenched her fists before her chest.

"...Thank you. That might be right. He might be cowardly and awkward, but there's no mistaking the fact that he's a kind person." Celia's eyes widened, her tone softening as she spoke.

"Cowardly, you say?" Sara asked hesitantly.

"Yup. He's a little distrustful of other people, or maybe you could call it being extremely wary about things. That's why he's a coward. Aishia was the one that said it though, I just applied my own reasoning to it," Celia said with a faint smile.

"...What about awkward and kind?" Alma asked curiously.

"Hmm... It's like he doesn't doubt the people he trusts, and will believe them to the end, you know? He once said so himself that he was distrustful of other people, but I don't

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think he actually wants to doubt them. That's why he's awkward, but kind." Celia seemed to be having fun talking about Rio to others, as her thoughts came out as words quite fluently.

"...You sure understand Rio well." The spirit folk girls were in awe, watching Celia with looks of respect. Meanwhile, Miharu was watching Celia with a half-envious, half-awed look. Aki, in turn, was observing on her.

"A-Ahaha, well, I have been close to him ever since he was in school." Celia seemed to be embarrassed, as she tried to brush it off with a laugh.

"Yup, I got it! In other words, you like Onii-chan, right?" Latifa suddenly exclaimed after quietly listening to Celia speak.

"Um... W-Why would you think that?!" Celia was taken aback, shouting as her face turned bright red.

"Eh? Because you really understand Onii-chan." Latifa tilted her head.

"T-That's because... I'm his teacher and he's my student!" Celia explained in a high-pitched voice.

"Hmm, I wonder if that's true... But you asked Onii-chan to help you run away from your wedding ceremony, right? I want to hear a little more about that. Right, everyone?" Latifa turned a dubious look at Celia, but continued with a question for Sara and the others.

"Ah..." That reminded them of the story behind Celia and her wedding.

"Come to think of it, that's right. We wanted to hear more details about that from you too." Sara nodded.

"E-Eeh? B-But I'm still in the middle of washing your tail, so how about I finish this first so we can sit in the bath? You might catch a cold like this." Celia hesitated, trying to avoid the topic, but it was clear that all further questions for her would surround said topic.

In the end, they ended up having a fairly long bath

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together, chatting and having fun. There was a slight dispute over room allocations once they got out of the bath and had to go to bed, but that is a story for another time.

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Chapter 7: To Amande Once More

The next afternoon, Rio departed from the rock house placed in the outskirts of the Galarc Kingdom to visit Amande. Miharu accompanied him, and Aishia was in her spirit form.

They were finally going to Liselotte's mansion.

The two of them went to the gate at the northern area of the city and went through all the designated processes before going to the mansion.

"Are you nervous, Miharu?" Rio asked the stiff-faced girl as they walked.

"Yes, a little. This will be my first time meeting a noble..." Miharu nodded awkwardly. She had already met a noble daughter when it came to Celia, but it appeared she had forgotten that fact.

"Cecilia's a noble too. Or does she not appear that way?" Rio informed her, using the alias that was decided. He was trying to ease Miharu's nerves and had a teasing smile on his face.

"...Ah, umm, in Cecilia's case, I heard in advance that she was close to you, so she didn't seem that way, or something... Of course, I think she's beautiful and intelligent, just like a princess, you know?" Miharu gasped and excused herself in a fluster. In reality, from Miharu's point of view, Celia was wonderful and had quite a presence to behold.

"She would be delighted to hear that. If you're not nervous interacting with Cecilia, then you should be fine with

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Liselotte too, so don't be so tense," Rio said, smiling naturally.

"Okay," Miharu nodded, peeking at Rio's side profile.

Thank goodness I can still speak normally even when I'm alone with Haruto. She sighed in relief.

It may have been Miharu's imagination, but she was a little worried that recently it felt like her relationship with Rio had been a little awkward. In particular, after Rio had returned to the village to inform them of Satsuki's whereabouts, and Miharu had tried to ask Rio about his previous life…

There were most likely two causes: the first was that Miharu herself was strongly convinced that Haruto — that Rio — was Amakawa Haruto. This one was for certain.

Then, as for the other… For some reason, ever since Rio had returned to the village, it felt like he had been distancing himself somewhat. Of course, he wouldn't do that in an obvious way and acted normal when they were with everyone else, but Miharu could feel a distance that was hard to put to words. It was different to being pushed away, more like being avoided…

It made Miharu feel sad. That's why she was a little anxious about today — she'd be in a situation with just the two of them. While part of her nerves was because of meeting Liselotte, the majority of it was because she had to be alone with Rio.

That being said, Aishia was with them too in her spirit form, so they technically weren't alone. On top of that, Miharu herself knew that her thoughts should be focused on other things right now, so she kept her doubts hidden in her heart.

That's right — today I'm here on behalf of Aki and Masato. This was my own selfish request, Miharu thought, refocusing her mind.

"For now, I'll do all the talking, so you can just focus on

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listening to Liselotte and I converse. It's enough if you just reply whenever Liselotte or I address you directly. A topic to be careful about would be if Liselotte brings up products appropriated from Earth knowledge." Rio must have thought Miharu's expression was of discomfort, as he spoke to her gently.

"O-Okay. I'll do my best, just like we discussed before," Miharu said with firm determination.

Liselotte Cretia. The fact she was appropriating knowledge from Earth to develop products in this world was basically an undeniable fact to Rio and the visitors from Earth. Consequently, they had deeply considered all the possible reactions Liselotte might show if Miharu, a Japanese person, showed up.

"You'll be fine, Miharu. Aishia's here in her spirit form too."

"...Yeah. Please take care of me, Ai-chan," Miharu giggled.

"I'm counting on you if the worst happens, Aishia," Rio said. That being said, the actual chance of 'the worst' happening was very low. It was nothing more than Rio's presumption, but having interacted with Liselotte several times now and seeing her interact with the hero Sakata Hiroaki in a normal manner, he was sure her attitude wouldn't suddenly change.

Got it, Aishia replied curtly.

"You see?" Rio said with a smile on his lips.

"Fufu, even if I can't see her, I can easily picture Ai-chan's face right now." Miharu also laughed in amusement. For the record, Aishia was currently within Rio's body in her spirit form, but was able to telepathically communicate with Miharu when she was at an extremely close distance, thanks to their previous temporary contract. With Rio present, it meant the three of them could communicate with their minds.

Then, as the three of them continued to chat casually, they

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arrived at the gate before Liselotte's mansion. Rio stopped around ten meters before the gate.

"This is Liselotte's estate," he said while looking at Miharu.

"I-It's huge. I was thinking that while we were walking too." Miharu stared at the outside of the mansion intently. The estate was enclosed in walls, but even without the walls it would have been impossible to see the entire grounds from their position. That was how large Liselotte's estate was.

"She's the daughter of a grand lord, and the president of a large merchant's guild too. Considering how Amande wasn't a large city to begin with, this would actually be a smaller property," Rio explained to Miharu. Amande was still under development and continuously expanding, so if there was more spare land to begin with, the estate would have been much larger.

The two of them discussed such things by the gate when one of the gatekeepers approached them.

"Greetings. Do you have business with the mansion?" the male gatekeeper asked. Rio and Miharu weren't hiding their bodies and faces with coats and hoods, so while their outfits were tidy, they clearly weren't nobles and could have appeared to be suspicious. Miharu's hair color was also altered with an artifact.

"My name is Haruto. I've come to request an audience with Lady Liselotte. If she is busy at the moment, then a future appointment would also suffice," Rio stated respectfully.

"Sir Haruto… My apologies for not recognizing you. You are the same swordsman who saved my master when she was being attacked by monsters, correct?"

"I wouldn't say I saved her outright, but…" Rio replied modestly with a wry smile.

"Then this girl… Are you Sir Haruto's companion, if I may ask?" The gatekeeper looked at Miharu.

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“Yes. Her name is Miharu Ayase.”

Rio gave Miharu’s full name, which made the gatekeeper think she was a noble from her last name. He widened his eyes and invited the two of them through the mansion gates. “…Understood. Then I shall first lead you to my master’s attendants, so please come this way. Hey, it’s Sir Haruto. Send a message to the mansion,” he said to the other soldiers at the gate. One of the soldiers ran towards the mansion to inform them of the situation first.

Rio and Miharu were then led through the gate and onto the estate. The garden of the estate was large and spacious, capturing Miharu’s gaze wherever she looked.

Then, once they reached the building, the front door opened to the attendants welcoming them. Cosette, Natalie, and Chloe appeared.

“Why, Sir Haruto, welcome to the estate.” Cosette took the lead to offer words of welcome, respectfully bowing her head. Natalie and Chloe did the same.

“Long time no see, everyone,” Rio replied to Cosette in a friendly manner. At that, Cosette raised her head and spotted Miharu for the first time, giving her a curious look. She didn’t voice any thoughts out loud.

“Yes, it’s a pleasure to be seeing you again. I’ve heard the situation. Please, come inside,” Cosette said brightly, inviting Rio and Miharu into the mansion.

“Thank you very much.” Rio bowed and followed Cosette’s lead inside.

“E-Excuse me,” Miharu also bowed awkwardly, following after Rio with timid steps.

“We’ll take over from here. Thank you,” Natalie said to the gatekeeper soldier upon their departure. The soldier promptly excused himself and returned to the mansion gate.

“I’m sorry for dropping by so suddenly, but I was hoping to at least secure an agreement for a future meeting,” Rio said to Natalie as they walked through the mansion.

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Natalie shook her head. “No, you are our master’s savior, so we’ve been ordered to always welcome you with priority upon your visit. You may need to wait for a short while, but you should be able to meet her today, so allow us to lead you to the drawing room,” she replied warmly.

“…I am honored to hear that.” Rio smiled in embarrassment.

“This is the drawing room. Please, go on in.” Once Cosette had led them to the drawing room, she quietly opened the door and prompted them inside.

“Excuse me.” Rio allowed himself to be guided inside and sat on a chair. Miharu nervously sat beside him. Afterwards, tea was promptly brought out.

“Now, please wait a moment until my master arrives. We will be waiting outside the room, so please call for us if you need anything.” The attendants retreated from the room respectfully.

Once Miharu was alone with Rio, she took a deep breath to calm herself. “…I-I’m feeling really nervous all of a sudden.”

“It’ll be okay — I’m sure she’ll agree to you accompanying us. Just leave it to me,” Rio assured her readily, but it wasn’t an empty promise by any means. Even if Liselotte were to refuse, he had brought a means of negotiation along.

“I’m sorry. Even though this was my own selfish request, everything’s left to you again…” Miharu felt ashamed of her own worthlessness and apologized.

“I’m doing it because I want to. Don’t let it bother you,” Rio encouraged Miharu with a smile. At that moment, a knock came from the door. Rio and Miharu looked towards the door, which opened a few moments later.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sir Haruto.” The one who entered was the master of the estate, Liselotte. Behind her was her head attendant, Aria.

“It’s been a while, Liselotte.” Rio immediately stood up

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and placed his right hand on his chest respectfully as he greeted her.

“N-Nice to meet you. Thank you for having me here.” Miharu also stood up promptly and bowed her head somewhat uncomfortably.

“...Miharu Ayase, was it? My servant informed me of your name. It’s nice to meet you. I am Liselotte Cretia, the governor of the city of Amande.” Liselotte glanced at Miharu and burned her appearance into her memory before introducing herself with a sociable smile.

“Y-Yes. It’s an honor to be in your presence,” Miharu replied, gulping nervously.

“It seems like you have something to discuss today, so why don’t we all take a seat.” Liselotte invited them to take their seats with receptive ease.

Once Rio sat down, he immediately launched into their discussion. “I’m here to discuss what I mentioned before — the reason why I requested to attend the night banquet. It’s something that involves Miharu, so she came along for this.”

“If you would care to elaborate?” Liselotte calmly prompted him to continue, her expression remaining the same.

“Miharu is a friend of Satsuki Sumeragi, the hero that was summoned in Galarc Kingdom. With this much information, I’m sure you can infer the rest.”

Liselotte closed her eyes for a moment. “...Aria, please step outside for a moment. Wait outside the door and make sure no one comes in.”

“...Understood.” Aria nodded respectfully, departing from the room as ordered.

“I apologize for that. The truth is, the hero... Sir Sakata and Princess Flora are still here at the mansion, so it’s possible they may come here. I took the necessary means to prevent them from interrupting our conversation.”

“Thank you,” Rio bowed his head with a faint smile.

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Sakata Hiroaki was certainly likely to barge into a room without any consideration, which would be undesirable indeed.

"...Actually, from the moment I saw Miharu's face, I had the impression her facial structure wasn't one that I've seen within the neighboring kingdoms. However, that is not enough to prove that Miharu is from the same world as the hero. Sir Haruto's testimony makes me lean towards the believing side, but if you don't mind, may I speak to Miharu myself a little? I should be able to ascertain whether Miharu and the hero are from the same world." Liselotte took a short but deep breath and stared straight at Miharu as she spoke.

"Ah, umm..." Miharu looked at Rio beside her and sought permission with her gaze. Rio nodded his approval at Miharu.

"Yes, I don't mind," said Miharu.

"*Once again, it's nice to meet you, Miharu. My name is Liselotte Cretia. I was a Japanese person in my past life. Can you understand what I'm saying?*" Liselotte suddenly started speaking in Japanese. Her pronunciation was a little awkward, but it was definitely Japanese.

"Uh..." Miharu was taken aback with intense shock. She had never imagined that Liselotte would suddenly start speaking Japanese — and neither did Rio.

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Unsure of how to respond, Miharu looked to Rio for confirmation. If Rio gave the wrong order here, he would be revealing that he could understand Japanese to Liselotte, but they had thankfully established a sign in advance just for this situation.

What should I do? Join the conversation too? But… Rio decided to observe for now, placing his right hand over his left hand and tapping his index finger twice. In other words: a yes.

"*Ah, umm… Yes,*" Miharu answered hesitantly in Japanese.

"*Are you wondering why I can speak Japanese? Or did you expect that I would be able to speak Japanese?*" Liselotte giggled, guessing at what Miharu could be thinking at the moment.

"*Umm, why did you suddenly speak in Japanese?*" Miharu asked. While the right answer was actually the latter, she was more curious as to the reason why Liselotte suddenly spoke in Japanese.

"*It's because you were able to speak the language of this world clearly. Your pronunciation wasn't entirely fluent, but the movement of your lips matches the sounds, so I deduced that you were able to understand the language of this world. That is the reason,*" Liselotte replied.

"*What do you mean by that?*" Miharu didn't seem to understand with just that explanation. She tilted her head dubiously.

I see… Rio grasped the reason with just that information and was very impressed, though he didn't show it on his face.

"*The only hero I've met so far has been Sakata, but he's just been speaking in Japanese. It seems to be automatically translated into the language of our world through some ability. I believe this is one of the powers of the divine arms, but it also means that if you look closely,*

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you'll see his lips don't match his words."

"*Umm…*" Miharu still didn't look convinced.

"*In other words, he didn't realize that the products of the Ricca Guild were named after Japanese or Earth words. But you knew, didn't you?*" Liselotte tilted her head and confirmed.

"*Ah, yes,*" Miharu said honestly. She had discussed this with Rio in advance; they decided it was okay to answer honestly in this regard.

"*In that case, you must have anticipated that the item must have been invented by either me or someone from the Ricca Guild, no? In fact, that's why you're here, is it not?*"

"*Y-Yes.*"

"*That's why I spoke in Japanese from the start, rather than hide in a roundabout way. The reason I chose to use Earth words for the Ricca Guild's products was to search for those who were like me, as a message. I didn't intend on hiding myself from those who received my message.*"

"*That's… amazing.*" Overwhelmed by Liselotte's sharp intellect, Miharu murmured her awe quietly. It was all she could do to keep up with her words, leaving her no room to think.

"*Thank you for the praise. But there's one thing I'm curious about,*" said Liselotte.

"*W-What is it?*" Miharu asked fearfully.

"*Japanese shouldn't exist in this world. So, how did you learn the language of this country? It seems like you've already acquired the language to an easily conversational level, but reaching that with self-study would require a tremendous amount of time. At the very least, it would be impossible to achieve in the time since the hero was summoned.*"

"…" Miharu listened to Liselotte's careful words with an uncomfortable expression.

"*In other words, you would have needed an excellent*

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teacher. Now who could have played that role… With all due respect, Sir Haruto, could it have been you?" Liselotte suddenly looked at Rio and asked in Japanese.

"*Ah, no…*" Miharu's expression stiffened as she looked to Rio in a fluster. Meanwhile, Rio's expression hadn't even flinched. He had prepared an excuse in advance, after all.

"*Yes, it is exactly as you suspect. Your observation skills and deductive abilities are most commendable,*" Rio praised Liselotte and easily confirmed her conjecture. This time, Liselotte's expression stiffened.

"*Then… really… Were you — were you reincarnated too? Did you regain your memories of Earth as you were living in this world? Your name — Haruto — is it…*" In a rare display of impatience, Liselotte tensed up and asked one question after another, but Rio put a stop to that.

"Please wait a moment. We have come here today for a different matter. I'm sure you must be limited on time too, so could we wrap up that business first?" Rio said, choosing to use the language of this world.

"…Please excuse my behavior, I got too excited," Liselotte apologized, returning to her senses.

"No, it's just that that discussion will take some time to get through, so we should plan another day where we can chat without interruption. For now, let's leave this discussion at my confirmation that I have memories of my past life as a Japanese person. Can we keep this a secret between us? I have no intention of revealing this to others that I do not know well." Rio shook his head respectfully, confirming the bare minimum. Of course he was willing to expand on this discussion later, but he didn't want to lose sight of their original objective here.

"Yes. At present, the hero, Sakata Hiroaki isn't aware of this either, so I would be grateful if we could keep it that way. I don't plan on telling anyone other than those that noticed my hint, so I can promise that I will not reveal your

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secret,” Liselotte agreed with a wry smile.

“Thank you very much. I shall promise the same.” Rio bowed respectfully.

“Then will you tell me more about this other matter? It seems I’ve made the mood a little strange…” Liselotte said, smiling faintly. As a result of what she’d started, this space was now occupied by one world hopper and two reincarnations. There was a sense of something hard to describe — almost like familiarity.

“It’s about Miharu. I wish to request that she joins us at the banquet where Satsuki will be introduced,” Rio said with a faint smile of his own.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Liselotte agreed readily.

“…Is it really okay?” Rio’s eyes widened in surprise. He’d expected there to be more resistance and discussion surrounding the topic.

“Yes. Miharu herself wants to attend the banquet, right? I do owe a great debt to Sir Haruto. That much of a request is easy to fill. Now that I know your goal, I have ascertained that you have no ulterior motives. It won’t make a difference if Miharu joins as well. More importantly, I wish to return to the discussion of our past lives as soon as possible,” Liselotte said, giggling with a smile true to herself.

“…Umm, thank you very much, Lady Liselotte.” Miharu had been observing part of the conversation in a daze, but she suddenly thanked Liselotte.

“No, don’t mention it. It was thanks to you that I was able to meet someone in the same situation as me.” Liselotte shook her head slowly, looking intently at Rio.

“…By which you mean someone who has memories of their past life, right?” Rio guessed.

“Yes. I’ve always wondered why I was reborn into this world, and whether there were other people who were reborn just like me. As I said earlier, that was the reason why I used Earth words in the Ricca Guild’s products.”

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“What made you think that?”

“I had a hunch. Based on the situation of my death, there should have been other people who died too. And if I had been reborn, then it was possible that the same happened to those people. That was my thinking.”

“…I see.” Rio stared at Liselotte. He had always held the same suspicion as well. He had managed to meet Latifa, after all.

“In that case, it’s possible that I knew of you.” With a serious expression, Liselotte gulped, then took a deep breath. “Sir Haruto… Did you perhaps pass away in a traffic accident in your past life?”

“…Before I answer that question… Miharu.” Rio did not respond to the question right away, instead addressing Miharu beside him.

“Y-Yes?” Miharu had been listening intently, flinching when she replied.

“Could I ask you to step outside for a moment?” Rio asked Miharu.

“Huh? Ah, but…” Miharu hesitated, wanting to remain present. However —

“…Please,” Rio bowed his head deeply.

“Uh, ah… I-I understand,” Miharu said dejectedly, her voice fading away. She couldn’t say no; Rio’s gaze asked her not to overstep herself.

“The attendants outside will lead you to another room. Please, follow me,” Liselotte couldn’t help but interrupt, urging Miharu out as well.

“…Okay.” In low spirits, Miharu reluctantly moved to leave the room. She slowly opened the door with a clack to see Aria and Natalie waiting outside.

“It seems Miharu isn’t feeling too well. Please lead her to another room to rest,” Liselotte ordered the two attendants.

The two attendants exchanged a look before Natalie stepped forward to lead her. “Understood. Lady Miharu,

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please come this way.” Aria continued to guard the door from outside intruders.

“...I apologize for that,” Rio said once the door was shut again. “It seemed like we were veering into territory I had yet to reveal to Miharu, so I wasn’t entirely prepared for it.” He bowed his head deeply.

“No, I should be the one to apologize. I brought it up out of the blue...” Liselotte apologized regretfully.

“No, let’s continue the conversation. Your question was whether I had died in a traffic accident... The answer is yes — that is exactly right,” Rio said with a strained smile, his face slightly unhappy.

“I knew it... Who... Who were you in your past life? Were you the young man in university? Or the little girl in primary school? The bus driver?” It was as though years of Liselotte’s questions had been defrosted all at once, filling her with a sense of triumph and impatience as she fearfully asked question after question.

“...I was the university student. And you?”

“The high school student. Do you... remember me?”

“I do recall that you were there, I believe...” Rio said, looking back on his vague memories.

“We’ve never had any direct contact. But I do remember you,” Liselotte said, examining Rio’s face with a smile.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. You always looked sad, so I was a little curious about you. And...” Liselotte looked at Rio’s face, pausing with meaning.

“...And?” Rio tilted his head curiously.

“No... But you also helped out the elementary school girl that time she missed her stop and cried on the bus, right?” Liselotte shook her head slowly, recalling her memories with fondness.

“You even remember that...”

“Yes. By the way, in my past life I was Rikka — Minamoto

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Rikka. The Ricca Guild's name actually derives from my own name in my past life," Liselotte revealed, now in a nostalgic mood.

"Rikka, is it? I... My name was Haruto. Amakawa Haruto." With the flow of the conversation as it was, Rio had no choice but to reveal his name.

"I figured. It's a name you hear here too, but I always thought it sounded more Japanese." Liselotte smiled happily, her eyes thin lines.

"Lady Liselotte... No, Rikka. I have a favor to ask of you," Rio began with a serious look.

"...Yes?" Liselotte adjusted her posture and replied.

"I'd like you to keep all information surrounding this a secret from Miharu, including my name."

"...May I inquire as to why?" Liselotte asked, staring at Rio.

"Miharu was summoned to this world from Earth, four years before we died."

"Huh...?" Liselotte's eyes widened.

"The same probably applies to the other heroes. Timeline-wise, we died after they were summoned to this world, yet we were reincarnated before they arrived. It is something we will have to tell them someday, but I want you to keep this from Miharu and the heroes for now," Rio explained awkwardly.

"I... see..." Even Liselotte was stunned by that bombshell, but she somehow managed to utter a response.

"If we talk about our previous lives, Miharu will definitely notice the gap in timelines. That's why I'd like you to entrust the timing of when to tell her to me," Rio said, staring at Liselotte's contemplative face.

"I understand, if that's the case... But shouldn't it be fine to tell her your previous name, at least?" Liselotte asked curiously. She didn't understand why he had specifically requested that.

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“…I cannot. Because Miharu should know who I was in my previous life.” With a dark expression, Rio shook his head.

“…” Liselotte was shocked once again.

“I revealed all of this to you because I trust you. Would you please consider doing this favor for me?” Rio bowed his head once again.

Liselotte took a breath to calm herself. “Please raise your head. I promise to do just that… But if possible, could you tell me a little more about you and your past life? And Miharu too, of course.”

“…Sure. If there’s anything I can discuss, I would love to. There are some things that I can’t discuss, but I shouldn’t keep Miharu waiting any longer for now. Could we set another date where we can sit down and talk casually?” Rio exhaled in relief, slumping his posture and nodding. He couldn’t get a clear read on Liselotte’s intentions yet, so he would keep Aki and Masato hidden for now.

“Of course.” Liselotte also nodded happily. There were many things about Rio that she was curious about, and they weren’t only to do with their past life. Even if it couldn’t be everything, simply receiving an agreement to learn more made her very happy.

“Then how about we wrap up today with one last question? If there’s anything you’re particularly curious about, I shall answer as much as I can to the best of my abilities,” Rio offered.

“I understand. Then, as it relates to the banquet, may I ask something with regards to Miharu? As well as what you’re thinking of doing in the future, after meeting Lady Satsuki. Or, it could be possible to meet Lady Satsuki before the banquet, in order to talk.” While she actually wanted to ask more about Rio, she didn’t want to be rude right off the bat.

“Really?” Rio’s eyes widened slightly in wonder.

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“Yes. Presently, all requests to meet Lady Satsuki have been denied, whether from internal or external of the kingdom. But if it were her friend, there may possibly be a chance. However, I’ll be going to the capital right before the banquet, so the request to meet her would have to be made then.”

“I would be very grateful for that. However, it’s not something I can decide alone, so would it be possible for me to bring that information back and consider it more?”

“Of course. There’s still plenty of time until the banquet. As long as you give me a reply before then, it won’t be a problem,” Liselotte said warmly.

“Thank you very much,” Rio said and bowed his head. After that, Rio gave Liselotte a simple explanation of Miharu’s intentions and they wrapped up their talk, agreeing to meet again in ten days before Rio went to find Miharu.

“Sorry for the wait, Miharu,” Rio said once he was led to the separate room where Miharu was waiting. Miharu was staring at the tea set left on the table before her in a daze, a picture of true boredom. She quickly stood up when Rio appeared.

“Ah, are you done already?”

“…Yes. I’ll explain on the way back. Shall we go?” Rio asked. He implied his need to meet up with Aishia and Celia by going home like this for today.

“See you again in ten days. Thank you for today.” Liselotte didn’t stop them, seeing the two off. Thus, Rio and Miharu were led out the mansion.

◇ ◇ ◇

On the way back from the mansion…

“It may be possible for you to see Satsuki before the banquet,” Rio informed Miharu.

“…Really?” Miharu asked in wonder.

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“Yes. Telling Liselotte about my past life was a bit unforeseen, but thanks to that, we were able to drop our pretenses and speak honestly with each other. She said that she’d try to put together a meeting before the banquet for us, if you so wish,” Rio explained to Miharu as brightly as possible.

“…Thank you very much. You’ve made things more and more beneficial for us. I honestly don’t know how to thank you…” In contrast, Miharu frowned apologetically.

“Don’t worry about it,” Rio said with a faint smile.

“It’s impossible,” Miharu muttered quietly.

“Huh…?” Rio was taken aback, his eyes widening a bit. Miharu stopped in her steps and grabbed onto Rio’s sleeves.

“I can’t do it anymore. It just won’t leave my mind. Haruto… Why do you… Why are you willing to go so far for us?” Miharu asked Rio clingingly.

Rio thought for a moment. “…Because I couldn’t just pretend to turn a blind eye. And I’ve already started helping, so I want to see it through to the end.”

“Is that all, though?” Miharu asked dubiously.

“What do you mean by that…?”

“I also… I also…” A conflicted but contemplative look appeared on Miharu’s face. *I also want to hear about your past life, please…* Those words were right on the tip of her tongue, but she just couldn’t get them out.

She knew the reason why… But she was too scared to know for sure. What if she was wrong? With Rio actually before her, that possibility ran through her head, making her too scared to ask.

“What is it?” Rio looked at Miharu’s face as though he was being pulled in.

Hey, people around you are staring. Aishia’s telepathic voice suddenly echoed in the back of their heads after being silent the entire time.

“Uh…” Miharu flinched. She had completely forgotten

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Aishia had been there the whole time, being that she was so silent. They were currently in the noble district, but like Aishia said, people's gazes were turned towards them curiously.

"Yeah, let's go back. Miharu, we can continue this once we're back at home. We should hurry and tell Aki and Masato about today's news, too," Rio said.

"...Okay," Miharu said in frustration.

After that, the two of them left Amande and entered the forest off the main road, before floating into the air and heading for the stone house. But in the end, Miharu was unable to continue their conversation.

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Chapter 8: Dreamland to Tomorrow

That night, Miharu had a dream.

With bleary awareness, she vaguely wondered where she was and what time it was. The sensation felt like one she had experienced just recently.

This is…

Right… This was a dream.

Contrary to Miharu's bleary awareness, she was certain she could feel her mind stirring awake. Right now, in front of Miharu, a familiar boy and girl stood facing each other. Of course they would be familiar: the two were childhood friends, and the girl was Miharu herself. The boy was, of course, Amakawa Haruto.

Miharu watched her young self face Haruto in a daze.

This was when Haru-kun and I parted ways…

Miharu dug through her memories to identify the scene that was playing out in her dream. There was no mistaking it — the dream she was seeing now was a reenactment of a memory.

It had been one summer day. The sun's rays scattered over them as the dream Miharu cried while desperately clinging to Haruto.

"Don't go, Haru-kun!"

"Don't cry, Mii-chan. We'll meet again, okay?" In contrast to the bawling Miharu, Haruto was gallantly trying to cheer her up. It was so vexing and saddening to see, Miharu's face fell into an expression of pain.

"I'll come get you when we're bigger! We'll get married!

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That way… we'll always be together, I'll always be beside you, and I can protect Mii-chan with my life!" Haruto declared to Miharu, earnest and desperate.

"Yes… yes! I want to marry Haru-kun!" The young Miharu's eyes sparkled fiercely as she hugged Haruto. It was a tender and fleeting promise made in their youth, with no binding power at all, but that was precisely why it felt so bright and precious to Miharu.

Mm…

Miharu couldn't help the tears that welled in her eyes as she watched the scene. There had been no sadder day in her entire life than this one… And yet, at the same time, there hadn't been a happier day, either.

That was why Miharu swore to be stronger and optimistic from that day onwards. As she grew older, the nature of her feelings changed, but the young Miharu blindly believed that one day Haruto would come to get her…

Huh?

The scene Miharu was looking at suddenly changed, like someone had switched television channels. Miharu's eyes widened as she blinked. It was though she was looking at a collection of scenes in a compilation. Miharu wasn't there, but Haruto was.

In the changing scenes that went by, Haruto was working his hardest in a variety of things. Studying, housework, farming, martial arts — he worked earnestly at all of them.

With that routine, Haruto slowly grew older bit by bit, and at some point, he reached the same age as the current Miharu. He was bowing his head at his father, asking to attend the same high school where he had once lived with Miharu.

Maybe… Maybe he remembered his promise with me? Miharu couldn't help but wonder. Then, the scene changed once again.

This is… the high school I'm going to…?

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Miharu gazed in shocked wonder at the new scenery before her. To her great surprise, the dream Haruto was standing there wearing the same school uniform as Miharu.

"…" On the campus with dancing sakura petals, Haruto was simply standing still, and his gaze was directed straight ahead of him. Miharu was lured into looking the same way.

Then, standing there — *Oh…!* — was Miharu.

Aki's stepbrother — Sendo Takahisa — had called out to her, so the two of them were talking with familiarity.

This was during the entrance ceremony… Miharu was able to place the exact moment she was witnessing. Yes, there was no mistaking it — this happened on the day of the entrance ceremony. While it felt like many days had passed since then, it wasn't actually that long ago, so her memories were still fresh. More than anything, that afternoon was the day she had wandered into this world, so the entrance ceremony was the only day Miharu wore her high school uniform.

Is this… really a dream? Miharu felt a strange sense of reality as the blood drained out of her face. Then, the dream Haruto who had been watching Miharu and Takahisa talk animatedly paused, before showing a small, sad smile.

Eh, ah… Perhaps what Haruto saw just now made him misunderstand Miharu and Takahisa's relationship, making him think they were dating. No… but even if he didn't misunderstand, the possibility could have risen in his head. Then, out of fear to confirm that—

Ah, w-wait!

Haruto turned on his heel. Miharu tried to call out to him, but her mouth wouldn't move and the words didn't come out. Even if she could think within this dream, she wasn't able to interfere with the people that appeared. With no other choice, Miharu hurriedly followed after Haruto.

No, Haru-kun — wait, please!

Miharu desperately tried to cling to Haruto, but she

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wasn't able to touch him. Haruto had a sad and uneasy smile on his face.

Seeing his side profile made Miharu's chest tighten in pain. Then, the scene of the dream changed once again.

?!

This time, she saw inside the school building. Haruto was walking down the corridor, heading towards a certain classroom. Just how much time had passed since then?

"Is Ayase Miharu here yet?" Haruto asked some girls standing near the doorway of the classroom.

"Ah, umm. Ayase?" A quiet girl standing closest to the door looked frightened at suddenly being addressed.

"Ah, isn't she the one who went absent without leave? You know, along with Sendo…" said a different girl.

"Absent without leave? But she was here for the entrance ceremony yesterday, right?" Haruto asked curiously.

"Right! There were rumors about that during the first break today. There has to be some deeper meaning to the two of them both going missing on the second day of school! The teacher didn't know why either, so people were saying they must have eloped. Right?" One of the girls seemed to like gossiping, as she answered the question happily. In contrast, Haruto's expression fell.

"I see… Thank you very much. Excuse me."

"Ah, wait! What class are you fro… Hey!"

But Haruto left immediately. The girls tried to call out to him, but he wouldn't stop for anyone.

Is this dream… what happened after I disappeared? Miharu thought, her face twitching. She felt a cold chill run down her spine. If that were the case, she was scared to imagine the future.

No… She didn't want to see it. She didn't want to see anything ahead of this. She was scared.

An indescribable fear ran through Miharu, making her want to flee… But she couldn't. Even if she was scared, she

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had to see it. She didn't have to say anything, at least; her existence wouldn't be noticed. Even if this was in her dreams, she still wanted to stay by Haruto's side, so Miharu resolved herself to watch to the end.

Time in the dream world continued ruthlessly. Before she knew it, dream-Haruto was attending university. He was saving a crying elementary school girl who had missed her bus stop, on his way home from campus himself.

…*Huh?* Miharu felt a strange sense of deja vu at the scene. If she recalled correctly, just recently —

Latifa said…

It was what had happened in Latifa's past life. She had been an elementary school student who missed her bus stop on a rainy day, when Haruto saved her while she was crying.

It's… raining…

It was pouring rain, Miharu confirmed.

Then this is one before…?

The two of them would die — Miharu remembered that and paled.

The next moment, the scene changed again. They were still on the bus, but Haruto's outfit had changed.

?!

Haruto was swaying to the bus' movements as he idly stared out the window. However, he suddenly noticed something and looked to his right rear. The elementary school girl Haruto had saved was sitting there.

"…?!" The elementary school girl had been staring fixedly at Haruto, but averted her eyes when she noticed him looking back. Haruto tilted his head with an unconvinced look. Miharu had been watching in a daze, but snapped out of it and reached for Haruto.

No, no, no, at this rate… no…!

But in the very next moment, the bus shook violently.

Haru-kun!

Miharu tried to hug Haruto's body in a panic, but his body

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lightly flew through the air, hitting the roof of the bus.

The cause was a traffic accident from ignoring a red traffic light — the bus had been going through the green light when a truck suddenly collided from the left rear. The truck tried to avoid the bus by immediately turning the handle to the right, but it crashed into the left rear of the bus and sent it toppling over. The rear end of the bus was smashed to pieces — destroyed to the point where anyone sitting there would not have made it.

Ah, ah, aah…

Miharu was standing outside of the bus before she knew it, watching the tragic remains of the accident in a daze. She could hear the screams of the witnesses around the scene.

No… no no no noooo!

Unable to bear it, Miharu screamed in her dream.

"?!" Miharu woke up. The moment she did, she could feel her heart thumping and her lungs gasping for breath. "Hah, hah, hah…"

Her pajamas were soaked with sweat, and her heart was beating loudly enough to tear her chest open. Her body was so cold, it didn't feel like she was alive. She couldn't stop trembling.

"That… was a dream, right?" Miharu whispered.

Yes, a dream. It had to have been a dream.

It was just too tragic to be real.

Something like that was just— it was just—

Haruto— Haruto isn't Haru-kun, right? It can't be, it can't, it can't… Miharu said to convince herself, but her intuition was stating otherwise. It was so horrible, so sad; tears were streaming from her face before she knew it.

"Miharu."

Aishia's voice echoed in her ear from close by.

"Wha— A-Ai-chan…?! Why are you in my room…?" Miharu's body shook as she answered. At some point, Aishia had appeared beside her.

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“Do you want to forget the dream you just had, Miharu?” Aishia suddenly asked.

“…What— What are you saying, Ai-chan?” Miharu grimaced.

“If you want to forget that dream just now, I can make you forget it. The next time you sleep and wake up again, you won’t have any memories left of your dream. But if you don’t want to forget it, then the next time you wake up, you’ll still have those memories,” Aishia explained calmly. “Which would you prefer?”

“W-Which…” Miharu’s expression was on the verge of tears. Just what could she mean? Perhaps this in itself was another dream. Miharu was so confused, she wasn’t sure what was happening.

“Right now, Haruto has closed off his heart. There’s no more turning back for him, so he doesn’t want to drag the people that are precious to him into his affairs. That’s why, at this rate, Haruto will one day say goodbye to those very people. Miharu… you’re included among those people. That’s why Haruto is trying to distance himself,” Aishia continued.

“…” Miharu’s heart was stirred, panic showing across her face.

“But it’s not yet too late. Because Haruto’s way of thinking is wrong… It’s true that he may no longer be able to turn back. But if you want to follow Haruto willingly, then that’s your freedom to do so.” When Aishia said that, Miharu exhaled softly in relief.

“That’s why, if you strongly desire to stay by Haruto’s side, you mustn’t run away. Stand and face Haruto straight-on, and strongly express your will.” Aishia stared straight at Miharu.

“…Okay.” Miharu was nodding before she knew it.

“But there was something you had to know before you could express your will to Haruto. That was the dream just

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now. If you want to stay by Haruto's side in the future, you'll feel even worse than what you felt while seeing that dream. Haruto is proceeding down such a path. That's why you needed to know that. If you don't think you should be with him because of that, if you think you'd be better off away from him… Sorry, I interrupted your conversation with Haruto today."

"What… What do you know, Ai-chan?" Miharu asked, who was frowning with a somewhat sad expression.

"I only know Haruto," Aishia said, shaking her head with a slightly sad but warm smile.

"…" Miharu said nothing; she didn't know how to respond. She had no idea what Aishia was feeling as she made such a face.

"You decide, Miharu. Do you still want to be by Haruto's side, after seeing that dream?" Aishia asked calmly.

"Ah…" Miharu gulped.

"In the not-so-distant future, Haruto will come to tell you the truth. Your chance will be then. If you want to stay by Haruto's side, you can't run away. Not now, and not then," Aishia said, reaching her hand out to pet Miharu's cheek softly.

It's cold… It was a hand that had no body temperature. And yet, for some reason…

…*It's warm.* Somehow, Miharu was filled with a warm and fuzzy feeling.

"Hey, Ai-chan. Wait." Miharu grasped Aishia's hand tightly. There was no hesitation in her eyes.

"I… I… I want to be with Haru-kun," she stated with firm resolution, but suddenly felt extremely sleepy.

"…Got it. It'll be okay — I'm here. Good night, Miharu." Aishia's mouth turned upward in a gentle smile as she offered those final words.

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Epilogue: Satsuki Afterwards

Meanwhile, in Galtuuk, the capital of the Galarc Kingdom…

On the highest balcony of a tower in the royal castle, Sumeragi Satsuki was idly watching the night sky, unable to fall asleep.

“The night sky is beautiful today too, huh,” Satsuki murmured sadly to herself.

I wonder if this place and Earth share the same sky?

It was a question she had asked herself many times since coming to this world. Though it wasn’t a question that could be answered by anyone here, that didn’t mean she would give up without a fight.

Satsuki took a deep breath. “I have to change the way I feel,” she muttered resolutely. She would no longer look to the past pessimistically. In order to do that, she decided to act her role as a hero for now.

The night of the banquet drew near.

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Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 8: Beyond Memories*.

In what feels like the blink of an eye, two years have passed since *Seirei Gensouki* was serialized, allowing me to release a total of eight volumes so far. This is all thanks to the readers that supported my work and all the people involved in publishing, who I'd like to thank from the bottom of my heart. I am always very grateful to each and every one of you.

Now, since I'm being emotional about the passing of time today, I'd like to look back on the many things that happened in the past two years of this series.

I held an autograph session when Volume 4 went on sale, the manga version of *Seirei Gensouki* by Tenkla was announced when Volume 5 went on sale, and there was even a popularity poll that was held when Volume 7 went on sale (the results of which are available online), and then the manga was suddenly discontinued…

Ah, and we also ranked on '*Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! 2017*,' released last November (thank you very much for that)! And so, with the release of Volume 8, I'd like to use this space to announce something new and exciting.

That being said, the announcement has already been posted everywhere online so I'm sure many of you are aware already, but a new version of the *Seirei Gensouki* manga will be starting this July. Replacing Tenkla as the artist will be Futago Minaduki, and the new manga series will be composed completely differently to the old one, so please

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check it out if you haven't had the chance to yet! (It's available for free through the website!) Thus ends my manga announcement.

Next, a different topic. Since there are still some lines available in the afterword, I'd like to talk about the main story of the work a little.

How did you find *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 8* after the long wait? I believe those who follow the web novel will be largely surprised by the contents.

It was a surprise… right?

Readers of the web novel should have expected things to an extent, like how Miharu did this, or Liselotte did that, or Latifa and the others did this and that. The light novel and web novel have already varied in content quite a bit, but expectations are made to be betrayed.

On the other hand, for the readers who have only read the light novel, I did my best to refine the plot so that the impact of a blank slate could be enjoyed. I hope you were able to enjoy the first time experience only attainable by not reading the web novel.

Thus, whether you're a web novel reader or light novel reader, there's no way for an author to discern which is better… but as long as you've found *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles, Volume 8* to be interesting, then nothing else could make me happier as an author. I have great plans for Volumes 9 and 10 to be even more exciting in the future, so please keep following this story and give it your love and support.

Finally, to Riv, who once again drew such lovely illustrations: thank you very much! Rikka's character design really hit a home run with me; I couldn't stop grinning! Also, congratulations on the birth of your child! I'd like to use this space to offer you my warmest congratulations.

— August 2017, Yuri Kitayama.

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Bonus Short Stories

During Hide and Seek

One day in the spirit folk village…

Around here should do.

Rio was playing hide and seek with the village children in the square. He sat behind a random tree and made himself as small as possible, then controlled his breathing so that he wouldn't be discovered easily. That being said, there were werebeast children who had strong senses of smell. Rio could technically use spirit arts to befuddle the noses of werebeasts, but they were just children, and it wouldn't be mature of him to go all-out against them. It would only be a matter of time until he was discovered —

"Found you, Onii-chan."

Latifa appeared out of nowhere and sat down beside Rio, then hugged him tightly to prevent him from running away.

"You're not the one looking, Latifa."

"Ehehe, I wanted to hide together with Onii-chan," Latifa confessed earnestly.

"I see. Then let's hope they don't find us."

"Yup."

Rio laughed gently and hugged Latifa softly by the shoulder. Latifa nodded happily in return and tightened her hold around him.

"Being together outside like this reminds me of when we used to travel together, heading for the village," Latifa suddenly said.

"Yeah," Rio nodded with a chuckle.

Back then, whenever they had a break or stopped for food,

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Latifa would stick closely to Rio just like this. She would take every chance she got to do so — not that she was any different now, but still.

"Fufu, Onii-chan's scent makes me feel safe. I love it!" Latifa buried her face into Rio's chest, rubbing her cheek against him.

She's grown bigger, but she's still affectionately spoiled, huh? Rio patted Latifa's head gently with an amused smile on his face.

Little Witch Rikka's Invitation?!

The high school Amakawa Haruto attended was a prep school that had both middle school and high school divisions. The high school division consisted of those who moved up from the middle school division, as well as those who tested in from outside.

One day in the middle of fall, the middle school division held their school festival ahead of the high school division. All kinds of events and stalls were taking place in the middle school grounds, attracting many visitors from both schools, as well as residents nearby; it was bustling with activity.

However, there was one female student who had slipped over to the high school side, seeking a moment of peace. The girl's name was Minamoto Rikka, a third-year middle school student.

"Phew, I'm beat." Rikka sat down on a bench and stretched her arms with a light sigh. She had been working as a waitress for her class's Halloween-themed cafe.

In the spirit of the cafe's theme, Rikka wore a light blue wig and a witch outfit. The skirt was rather short and the shirt emphasized her chest a little, attracting curious gazes from people while she walked to her current location.

"Huh, what a coincidence. What are you doing here?"

Two older boys appeared out of nowhere, and one of them

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called out to Rikka.

"...Who are you? You're not students from here, right?" Rikka replied to the boys rather cautiously.

"Oh, there's no need to be so wary. We were at your store as customers, and we spotted you by chance just now," one of the boys said smoothly, as though he had prepared those words in advance. But they were quite far from the middle school grounds; it wasn't a place that was so easy to wander to by coincidence.

Did they follow me? Rikka wondered.

"I see. Bye, then." Rikka immediately stood up from the bench and strode off. Without missing a beat, the boys began to walk along with her, sandwiching her between them.

"Hold up. We just wanted to be friends with you. What's your number? Ah, you should show us around the festival if you have time. The name's Sakata, by the way."

"Sorry. I have things to deal with." Rikka quickened her pace in an attempt to leave the boys behind.

"But you were sitting on the bench just now, right?" the boy said, having observed Rikka's actions before.

Ugh, how annoying.

Just as Rikka was getting fed up —

"Ah, there you are. I was looking for you."

From a slight distance away, a male student from the high school division called out to Rikka.

"Ah? And who are you?" Unhappy, the boys spoke menacingly to the newcomer.

"I'm a student from the high school division, and I was searching for her. ...Do you know these people? The teacher will be here soon, so if there's any trouble, I'll speak up as a witness," the male student replied undauntedly, hinting at the presence of a teacher.

"Wha? N-No, we were just asking for directions." The boy seemed to be intimidated, as his voice cracked when he

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answered.

“The middle school building is that way.” The male student smiled and pointed at the path that led back to the middle school division.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” The boys promptly retreated towards the middle school grounds, leaving Rikka alone with the male student who had appeared.

“T-Thank you very much, Amakawa-senpai,” Rikka sighed in relief and thanked the boy — Amakawa Haruto.

“...Sorry, have we met before?” Haruto tilted his head curiously. He didn’t recall ever meeting Rikka before.

“Ah! N-No, you’re just famous among the middle schoolers! That’s why I know your name, s-sorry!” Rikka apologized in a panic.

“It’s nothing to apologize for... But, am I really famous?” Haruto’s eyes widened.

“U-Umm, it’s just that one of my friends likes you, so...” Rikka explained rather awkwardly.

“...O-Oh. I see. Sorry for asking,” Haruto apologized hesitantly.

“N-No! I’m the one who’s sorry!” said Rikka.

An awkward silence fell between the two of them. Then, after a beat...

“...Shall I walk you back to the middle school?” Haruto suggested. “You might run into those people again on your way back.”

“Thank you very much. I-If you don’t mind, then please. Ah, our class is doing a cafe, so please come visit! I’d like to thank you for your help just now anyway!” Rikka bowed her head shyly.

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